Rev. O. P. Clinton

Orson P. Clinton was born on November 22, 1808, in Ferrisburg, Vermont. The ninth of ten children, he was not able to leave the family farm and begin life on his own until he was twenty years old. Although up to this point he had only a meager education, he possessed the experience of a rugged pioneer life and the determination which went with it. Although trained as a teacher, his interest in church work led him to consider a new direction for his life's work. In 1835, at the age of twenty-seven, Clinton was ordained as a pastor in the Congregational Church and began his ministry in Lewis, New York.

Seven years later, Clinton responded to a plea from the American Home Missionary Society (A.H.M.S.) for ministers to go West and establish churches in new settlements. In 1842, Clinton left for the Wisconsin Territory with his wife and two daughters. The mission of the Society to assist weak congregations and carry the Gospel to people without churches was supported in 1842 by Congregationalists and New School Presbyterians. During his first three years, Clinton served congregations in Southport (now Kenosha), Atkinson, Aztalan, and Lake Mills. Between 1840 and 1845, the number of Presbyterian churches in Wisconsin increased from twelve to twenty-one and Congregational churches from nine to fifty-two. Religious leaders in the east as well as the west felt a deep obligation to lay a firm foundation for upholding Puritan values, thus saving westerners from their preoccupation with personal gain, attitude of worldiness, superficial piety, and religious error. "Satan", declared Clinton, "desires this country for an ornament, and unless under God the benevolence, piety, and courage of the church keep it from him he will have it".

In 1845, Clinton was appointed general missionary for northern Wisconsin to serve in much the same manner as a Methodist circuit rider. This was highly unusual for the A.H.M.S., but the appointment came in direct response to an increasing need for religious development in the Territory and too few ministers
to meet the demands. At thirty-seven, Clinton was considered one of the religious leaders of great influence in Wisconsin.

The new territory charmed Clinton; indeed, he thought it unsurpassed in the western country and very inviting to immigrants. It had good soil which was easy to till and cultivate with all the advantages of the prairie and better timber than he had ever seen before. Lake Winnebago, which lay thirty-five miles west of Lake Michigan, was a "fine sheet of water 30 miles in length and 10 miles in width." Clinton viewed the country around the lake and along the river as being essentially attractive to settlers, it seemed so beautiful a place to live that it would no doubt be taken within a year. In recounting all the advantages, Clinton hoped the facts might reach some of the "pious" who were planning to migrate west so that a fair degree of religious influence might come to an area destined to become densely populated.

Clinton attacked his mission with zeal. During the first three months from January to March, he traveled over seven hundred miles preaching at twelve different localities in five counties. Armed with an axe, a shovel, and a few feet of rope, Clinton traveled by horse and buckboard. The going was not easy as he had to wade through marshes, ford rivers, drive over ice-covered bridges, and find his way through long stretches of timberland, often with only the aid of marked trees to guide him. It seemed to him that he had been preparing all his life for this pioneer ministry.

In December, 1845, Clinton visited Winnebago Rapids, now Neenah, where he was a guest of Harrison Reed and his wife, Ann Louisa, in their blockhouse home on the shores of Lake Winnebago. During his visit, Clinton held a service in Reed's cabin for a small congregation composed of seven white men and a few Indians. One of the first pioneers on the scene, Reed enthusiastically shared with Clinton his dreams to develop the site and attract people who shared his vision.

Throughout the winter months of 1846, Clinton made his missionary calls with diligence. He preached in his new territory except for one Sabbath when he returned to his former pastorate at Lake Mills where his family still lived. Early in the spring of 1846, Clinton decided to move his family to a permanent residence in Neenah, about eighty-five miles north of Lake Mills. There were two reasons for this decision. Although the settlement was at the northernmost boundary of his territory, Clinton was convinced that the vicinity was the most important point for his labors. Secondly, Clinton reasoned that the area had thus far been kept by Providence from being occupied by "anti-gospel influences" and was
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accessible to the "lovers of the elevating principles and institutions of a pure Christianity". He was concerned that there was a Catholic settlement of considerable influence about eleven miles north toward Green Bay and another on the Wolf River twenty miles west, the latter inhabited mainly by Indians, French, and half-breeds. The land between these outposts of the Roman Catholic Church was very inviting to settlers and to Clinton it was a question of great interest as to who would occupy it, for the area was surely destined to "bear great responsibilities". "If Romanists should occupy this ground", Clinton wrote, "or infidels who are often employed as the most successful agents of the man of sin great will be the loss to the church of Christ". Thus he concluded that his presence might help to bring a morally healthy population into the area. To this end, Clinton became a self-appointed immigration agent and expressed his convictions orally and in writing to both friends and acquaintances.

He was enchanted by the beauty of the setting and described a beautiful island of about one hundred acres lying between two outlets from Lake Winnebago where Governor Doty had built a residence which he hoped to occupy when he retired from public life. The water power and building improvements offered a distinct advantage, although the latter was run down due to abandonment of the property. The reason for the failure of the Indian project Clinton was not entirely able to learn, but he was satisfied that when the facts were fully known, "it will be seen that it was an attempt to turn wild men without Gospel and a failure would be a matter of course".

In March, 1846, Clinton moved his wife, Caroline, daughter Katie, and adopted daughter, Hattie, to Neenah where they planned to move into one of the blockhouses near the point where the land on the south shore of the channel projects into Lake Winnebago in what today is Riverside Park. Six year old Katie (Catherine) was delighted that the dwelling they were soon to inhabit had a lake nearly at the back door. A marvelous tree known as the "Council Tree" where Indians had counseled together and whose limbs stretched over the top of the house was ideal for climbing. The house needed some renovation since the Indians who had occupied it previously had chosen to live outside and stable their ponies inside after removing the floors. The two-story log house had two rooms on the second floor and three on the first. After an initial tour, Katie and her father decided a floor would be the first order of business.

The Clinton home also served as a meeting place for the Neenah congregation. Twelve people attended the first religious service including
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Governor and Mrs. James Duane Doty. In May, 1846, the first marriage took place between Jeanette Finch, sister of Caroline Clinton, and John Johnston. When the Clinton and Finch families moved to Neenah, John, who was also from Lake Mills, followed and immediately proposed marriage to Jeanette. The ceremony was to take place under the Old Council Tree, but because of rain had to be moved inside the Clinton's house. It was a very important occasion and nearly every settler in the community attended the wedding. Clinton's move to Neenah coincided with the beginning of his second quarter as itinerant missionary. He assessed the area and determined the most promising settlements in which to establish local churches. During a month long circuit, he planned to visit each settlement once for a sermon either on Sabbath or a weekday evening. In each locality he could count on a group of twenty or more to hear his Gospel message. Clinton also planned to preach at Neenah every fourth Sabbath and have the intermediate Sundays in his absence occupied with prayer meetings, reading meetings, or Sunday School. The other settlements on his itinerary were Oshkosh, Rosendale, Springvale, Waukau, Rushford, Strong's Landing (now Berlin), and Fond du Lac. By June, Clinton decided the way was prepared for the organization of three churches, although more labors would be needed if any of them was to become self-sustaining. People "professing the Faith" were urged to obtain their letters in preparation for forming a church of the denomination they preferred, either Presbyterian or Congregational, in accordance with the policy of the A.H.M.S. Clinton's duty was to encourage the congregation to plan for the support of a future minister and to help it continue to do everything possible to maintain worship, prayer, and Sabbath schools.

Clinton's circuit required extensive travel. Although his health remained good, the pace was enough to try the most hearty individual. For an example of the strenuous nature of his work, on one Saturday Clinton paddled ten miles in his canoe and then walked seven miles to preach. On Sunday, he administered the Lord's Supper, preached three sermons, and returned on Monday the same way he had come. On his return trip to Neenah from Oshkosh, which was the last stop on his monthly tour, Clinton hauled nearly all the supplies for his family in his buggy. Due to the rains, the roads were often nearly impassable, forcing him to cut a path around "seemingly bottomless" mudholes with an ax. Often his daughters would accompany him on his missionary visits. The little girls would ride quietly next to their father and refrain from asking questions or talking unless he initiated conversation, for he used the time to compose his sermons.
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In October, 1846, the first year of Clinton's commission as traveling missionary came to a close. He spent most of his time in those settlements which demanded his immediate attention, while breaking new ground elsewhere as quickly as possible. In the first year, he formed no churches since there was no prospect of them being regularly, or even occasionally, supplied with a minister. There was immediate need he told his superiors, for at least four or five ministers in northern Wisconsin. Both Neenah and Oshkosh wanted him on a full-time basis, but Clinton was reluctant to leave the other settlements without a minister. There was always the matter of salary, for the minister's expenses had to be met and his stipend from the Society was sent only after his quarterly report was submitted. The men of Neenah had raised seven dollars which left a balance of ninety-three dollars due from the Society for the quarter. If he were to continue in the same capacity he said, the Society would have to compensate him for travel expenses. One hundred dollars a quarter was no longer enough for his family to subsist on with the "wear and tear" of traveling. He had been forced to ask for an advance on his draft each quarter. Clinton estimated that in his first missionary year he traveled about seven thousand miles, preaching nearly two hundred sermons.

Early in the summer of 1846, the Neenah congregation took possession of another of the old blockhouses which they planned to use for a church and school. Since the structure had also been used as a shelter for Indian ponies, which was a common practice, it lacked floors, windows, and doors. With a united effort, the membership cleaned and refurbished the dwelling. Many of the seats were nothing but slab benches with no backrests, for lumber was at a premium. During the winter of 1847, the Cornelius Northrup family occupied the Neenah church free from rent, and in exchange it was always warm and in readiness for church and Sunday School. Early in January, Clinton held one of his monthly "concerts" - a service in which he preached a sermon and then took up a collection for the A.H.M.S. The ten dollars received from people with scarcely the basic accommodations of pioneer life was regarded as more generous than any gift given by a city congregation in the "favored East".

In February, 1847, Clinton wrote to the Society that he decided to supply the church in Neenah on a full-time basis and not continue as a traveling missionary. He believed Neenah was important enough to warrant a church with a full-time minister, particularly with the Catholic influence close at hand and the rise in immigration. Besides, during the fifteen months of his itinerant ministry, several
new missionaries had appeared in his territory. In March, 1847, a committee from the congregation drafted a letter to the Executive Committee of the A.H.M.S. formally requesting Clinton as their full-time supply or minister. With groundwork completed, the formal organization was planned for the first Sabbath in April. Composed wholly of residents of Neenah, the congregation numbered from fifty to seventy-five with a Bible school of twenty and a Sabbath school of fifteen. "Mr. Clinton", they wrote, "is loved and respected...[his] services...we cannot but feel will tell favorably upon the future destiny of this place".

On April 4, 1847, the Neenah church came into being. Twelve members united by letter and one by profession. The Lord’s Supper was administered and the first male white baby born in Neenah, Aleric Duane Clinton was baptized. "This part of the exercises were so solemn and impressive", Clinton wrote, "that almost the whole congregation were affected to tears". Yet the organization was not accomplished without difficulties. Although there was a variety of religious affiliations in Neenah, most of the settlers were connected with either the Congregational or Presbyterian church. Clinton labored to make the organization harmonious and prevent discord by holding preparatory meetings in which views and feelings could be aired. There had been strong opinions about the form of government the church would embrace, but there was also a stated willingness to go with the majority. Throughout the sessions, Clinton acted as moderator, never taking sides. The Congregational form of government was adopted by a majority of eight, but the Presbyterian faction then decided not to unite. Clinton remained hopeful that the dissenting group would affiliate as its members had continued to attend church and besides, treated him with kindness and respect. He hoped that the union would occur at the next Communion which was set for the first Sabbath in July.

In his quarterly report written during October, 1847, Clinton expressed deep concern over the state of the church at Neenah. "We have suffered numerous embarrassments", he wrote, "occasioned by the collision into which some of the businessmen in town have fallen". Clinton’s remarks alluded to a business venture, for on February 8, 1847, the Legislature had chartered a company to construct and maintain a dam across each channel for the production of water power. The company consisted of Governor Doty, his son Charles Doty, Curtis and Harrison Reed, and Harvey Jones. Amicable relations within the group soon deteriorated and the dissension and litigation which followed greatly affected business and social relations in the community. Clinton used his sermons to
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preach on the importance of "uprightness", the nature and consequence of controversy, and the healing which comes from reconciling all difficulties upon Gospel principles. He was hopeful that matters would soon be amiably settled. However, secular difficulties among the villagers kept many from coming forward to receive the sacraments.

Early in the autumn of the same year, the Clinton family moved into Governor Doty's home on the east end of the island. Named the "Grand Loggery" by Mrs. Doty, it was a roomy house built in 1845 in full view of Neenah to the south. The land had been a favorite camping ground of the Winnebago and Fox Indians and still retained remnants of their corn fields. In any event, Governor Doty had taken an interest in Clinton. He attended church in Neenah regularly and offered to help in establishing more churches. When Doty learned that he would be away from Neenah for an extended period of time, he offered his house to Clinton rent free. Clinton gratefully accepted the offer. In 1849, Charles Doty, son of Governor Doty, presented Clinton a gift of ten acres on the island where Clinton built a log house of his own in 1854.

Pioneer life in Neenah required resourcefulness and ingenuity. The minister was often out in the morning before breakfast with his fishing pole. Provision for the family meals was always made before the need arose. The nearby forest provided wild fruits; the garden, under the minister’s hoe, yielded vegetables, while fruit from his orchard supplied the ingredients for sauce and other delicacies. From Indian friends, the Clintons purchased the grain known as wild rice and maple sugar which was used as a sweetener. "Forest fresh meat markets were very flush", recalled Clinton, who on occasion hunted bear, raccoons, squirrels, rabbits, pheasants, and water fowl. He was the master of every situation and possessed an unerring ability to apportion meals evenly when unexpected guests arrived, knowing there were no reserves in the kitchen. The Clinton family was rarely half the household, for the pastor’s house was open to all who came in need of shelter or care, and much of the credit for accommodating those who called was due to Caroline who, despite her delicate health, was a wonderful mother and manager in the most difficult situations. There was often not room at the first table for the children as it seemed that everyone was traveling west in the early days. Strangers with no place to go and no money for room and board were housed and fed; if they were ill they were nursed until they were well.
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The missionary’s home was a haven for those in need, but even in the most trying times, there was rarely discord between mother and father nor was there impatience in the discipline of the children. And, family worship continued unabated. Each morning the whole family gathered immediately after breakfast for devotions. After Clinton read the first two verses of the chapter, the Bible was passed to the right and two more verses were read and so on around the table until the chapter was completed. In the evening when the family gathered for worship, a copy of the hymnal was given to each person present and everyone joined in the singing. Both parents were fine singers and their voices enhanced any gathering. At bedtime, the minister read from the Scriptures and then offered a prayer of thanksgiving. An atmosphere of love, respect, and harmony enveloped the Clinton family. True, mother and father often joked and had light conversation, but there was never disrespect, sarcasm, or faultfinding between them. They did their best to show by example, a life of love and "Christliness", as Katie called it many years later.

During the summer of 1847, Clinton and Reverend Porter from the Presbyterian Church of Green Bay arranged to exchange pulpits for a Sunday. Since there were no roads or bridges Clinton anticipated rough going; nonetheless, he set out with Caroline and his infant son in a buggy on the Friday preceding. After fording both branches of the river at the head of the island, he followed the beach of the lake to Clifton. Logs and downed trees provided obstacles which forced the horse into the water up to his flanks at times. When the Clintons reached Clifton, there were no inhabitants to be found and so the family ate their lunch in a clearing. Forging ahead, they cut their way to the military road, a two mile stretch partly following an old, overgrown Indian road. By the time they reached the beach, evening had fallen and the Clintons rested for the night. On Saturday they were able to complete the trip with relative ease.

When his commission at Neenah ended in January, 1848, Clinton decided to renew his labors as itinerant minister for the following year. He traveled as before, supplying destitute churches in his territory as well as the Neenah church, but his territory was in such need of ministerial services that he was scarcely able to answer all his calls. There was still the problem of the adequate compensation. The Neenah church had raised twenty-five dollars for the quarter to help meet Clinton’s salary. Currency, however, was not the only way of paying the minister. When the larder was empty, it was time for the pastor and his wife to make calls on the parishioners. When they returned home, there was always
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evidence of the congregation's generosity in the cutter - ham, eggs, butter, and baked goods. On occasion, there were donation parties after which the family would feast for days on the leftover pies and cakes. At one such party one hundred fifty parishioners visited the Clinton house. Boxes from the A.H.M.S. also brought goods and used clothing collected for the missionaries in the west.

By January, 1849, Clinton had added Menasha to his regular list of appointments, but his commission as traveling missionary was not renewed for the following year. His successor was Cutting Marsh who came to Wisconsin in 1830 as a missionary to work with the Stockbridge Indians who had been transplanted from Oneida County, New York. Both Presbyterians and Congregationalists conducted the evangelizing of Indians under the auspices of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. Clinton's supervisors thought that he was confining himself too much to one area and desired a man who would form a circuit composed of many preaching points.

The congregations of Neenah and Menasha were very anxious to re-hire Clinton and seized upon the opportunity to invite him to return as full-time supply. Equally to the point, they raised two hundred dollars toward his salary. The A.H.M.S. commissioned Clinton to the Congregational churches of Winnebago Rapids (Neenah) and Menasha which commenced on April 1, 1849, for twelve months. A committee from the Neenah church drafted a letter to the Society Executive Board in May, 1849, expressing regret that they had had to release Clinton in 1848 and were delighted to have his services as they had literally been without a supply for a year. His services, they continued, would be equally divided between Neenah and Menasha; attendance at both places was good even with the recent organization of an Old School Presbyterian Church in Neenah. Local differences over community development affected religious life in the area. In the spring of 1848, Cornelius Northrup and his son, C.P. Northrup, moved to the wilderness on the north side of the Fox River where the only sign of civilization was an Indian trail following the river bank. In 1849, the Sanborns and the Donaldsons followed. Clinton had high expectations from these developments. He predicted growth for both communities as settlers were appearing at a more rapid rate than ever before. Unhappily, the population growth did little for the religious strength of the settlements although it increased Clinton's responsibilities and his work. Religious indifference, worldliness, and freedom from the restraints of the east were obstacles which faced missionaries in the west. In both localities the congregations were chiefly composed of
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laboring men with limited "pecuniary means" who were widely scattered in the villages and the surrounding countryside. "We are", Clinton wrote, "in the midst of wickedness, worldliness, and the spirit of speculation are [sic] carrying the masses on through life, caring little for God or for anything that pertains to the soul". Still, he said that he was laboring to maintain the institutions of the Gospel and to guide the people in the teachings of Christ.

By 1849, the Neenah congregation was as large as the building would hold, and the members were strong and united. The Menasha congregation met in a tavern. Clinton hoped that soon a school would be built where the services could be held. Once the first families were settled in Menasha, Clinton consulted the foreman of public improvement about holding Sunday services. The foreman curtly replied, "No time for the Sabbath yet. Our work is too urgent to be interrupted". Undaunted, Clinton applied to Mr. Clark Knight, the hotel keeper, for permission to use his facility which was a huge log cabin for church services. The largest room in the house was the barroom with a well-stocked bar in one corner. The proprietor was somewhat taken aback and embarrassed at the request, but Clinton assured him that the atmosphere was unimportant because he could preach as well in a bar as in a church. However, he did insist that the customers wait to be served until the finish of the services. When thirsty men dropped in during a service and had to wait patiently until it was over, it was not uncommon for Clinton to take the opportunity to lengthen his message. His youthful experience with his father's addiction to liquor coupled with the church's strong stand on the evils of alcohol, made Clinton an earnest advocate of temperance. As it turned out, the barroom services lasted but a few weeks. The congregation moved several times before it could take advantage of the Clinton Schoolhouse.

By 1850, Wisconsin had thirty-five Presbyterian ministers, fifty-eight Congregational ministers, and seven Welsh Congregational ministers. Winnebago County with a population of 10,167 located in thirteen townships, had five ministers and six churches. With the increase in population, the flock at Neenah outgrew the blockhouse and in October, 1849, relocated in a room which it leased for six months. A generous donation provided the means to ready the room for worship and to provide seating. The Menasha congregation met in a small building erected by private enterprise which was to be used for educational and religious purposes, the present site of St. Mary's Church. The building was about sixteen feet wide and thirty-six feet long. A center aisle divided two rows

1851

Small frame building erected by Rev. Clinton for the dual purpose of church and schoolhouse stood on the northwest corner of Broad and Milwaukee Streets, Menasha.
of seats made from rough boards. The pulpit was constructed of two boards standing upright with a wide plank nailed across the top. On either side of the pulpit, the choir sat in two rows facing each other with the men on one side and the women on the other. Clinton was obliged to hold three services each Sunday in the two towns.

On January 15, 1851, Clinton was forced to leave his pastorate because of ill health, five months before his commission was to expire. Reverend Charles L. Adams, who had been sent by the Society, was accepted by the Neenah congregation and Clinton labored as he could in the surrounding area as a missionary at large. Reverend J. W. Walcott, who had been sent from New York by the A.H.M.S., took over the church in Menasha. Clinton worked diligently to effect the formation of the church and the congregation adopted a resolution of organization on January 18, 1851. The preliminaries completed, the formal organization took place on Sunday, February 16, with Walcott as the new pastor. There were twenty-five original members. Twenty-four joined by letter and one by profession. Clinton was well satisfied that two men of such deep piety and marked ability had been sent by the A.H.M.S. to relieve him.

During the years between 1846, when he was first commissioned as itinerant missionary and 1857, twenty-one churches were organized within the bounds of Clinton's field. Except for the years between 1862-1865 when he served as chaplain to the Twenty-First Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry Regiment, Clinton remained with the A.H.M.S. He retired in 1885, but continued to serve as a supply pastor and at eighty years of age, still preached twice each Sabbath at the Congregational Church in Menasha. He estimated that during his long missionary career he had traveled as many as ninety thousand miles and preached more than four thousand sermons. In 1871, Clinton reminisced in a letter to Secretary Badger at the A.H.M.S.:

More than 35 years ago I received my first commission from that Society at Lewis, New York. . .in the autumn of 1842, I came to Wisconsin as a missionary of the same Society. . .with the exception
of four years that poor health kept me from active labors, and nearly three years in the army, I have been doing pioneer missionary work... I can never cease to love the Society for its efficient and persevering work for the Master. I have grown old in this work; I love it; and it is trying to be obliged to leave the field so much remains to be done.

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Mary Kidd
of slate boards from rough boards. The pulpit was constructed of two boards standing upright with a wide plank nailed across the top. An additional of the same width was nailed across the pulpit to prevent the book stand from sliding. The inscriptions of the book were not as clear as they might have been, and the names of the ministers not as easy to read, but it was considered as only a line of type. On January 15, 1861, Clinton took the American or Black Armband, and the health, five months before his commission was to expire. Reverend Charles L. Adams, who had been sent by the Society, was occupied by the Hebrew Christians and Clinton labored as his coadjutor in the surrounding area as a missionary at large. Reverend J. W. Walcott, who had been sent from New York by the A.H.M.S., took over the church in Menasha. Clinton worked diligently to affect the formation of the church and the congregation adopted a resolution of organization on January 15, 1861. The preliminaries completed, the formal organization took place on Sunday, February 19, with Walcott as the new pastor. There were twenty-five original members. Twenty-four joined by letter and one by profession. Clinton was well assured that two men of church deep piety and marked ability had been sent by the A.H.M.S. to rescue them.

During the years between 1846, when he was first commissioned as a Western missionary and 1857, twenty-one churches were organized within the bounds of Clinton's field. Except for the years between 1862-1863 when he served as chaplain to the Twenty-Fifth Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry Regiment, Clinton remained with the A.H.M.S. He retired in 1869, but continued to preach as a busy pastor and at eighty years of age, still preached twice a week Sabbath at the Congregational Church in Menasha. He estimated that during his long missionary career he had traveled as many as ninety thousand miles and preached more than five thousand sermons. In 1871, Clinton announced in a letter to Secretary Delight at the A.H.M.S.:

More than 35 years ago I received my first commission from your Society at Laton, New York. In the autumn of 1846, I came to Wisconsin as a missionary of the same Society. With the exception...