A Tale of Twin Cities Continues

That the two cities, Neenah and Menasha, should co-exist was perhaps preordained. The geography, the kind of men who settled here, even the time in the history of the country when the cities were created, seem to preclude that twin cities would be established and continue to grow as separate entities.

When two branches of the Fox River exited Lake Winnebago in post-glacial times, they left between them the large island, later named Doty Island. It is little wonder that one settlement began on the south banks and another on the north. This was a typical pattern for "river cities". It was the presence of Doty Island between the mouths which made this settlement pattern different. As matter of fact, a third community, to be known as Island City, was envisioned by James Doty but never became a reality.

In the short period covered in this book from the first sale of government land in 1836 until the completion of the canal system in 1856, new towns were being established everywhere in the former Northwest Territory and most of them were on the banks of a river system. River travel, being the easiest and fastest means of transportation, decreed that cities grow where there were water power and water connections to other parts of the country. Many communities like Chicago, Milwaukee, Green Bay, Oshkosh, and innumerable others began as two small towns which came together as one when bridges and railroads connected them. Neenah and Menasha were a different story. For one thing, each of them had its own source of water power and was not dependent on the other.

Besides the geographical presence of two mouths of the river and intervening Doty Island, the human element also entered the picture to separate the two developing communities. When one considers the contrast in personalities of the early founders, combined with their differences in reasons for settling here, it is little wonder there came to be two communities.
A Tale of Twin Cities Continues

Harvey Jones and Curtis Reed, considered by historians as the founders of Neenah and Menasha, respectively, both moved from the East and felt they had located the ideal spot to put down roots and establish their future.

The reader has already encountered Harvey Jones, the wealthy investor from Gloversville, New York, and Curtis Reed, who had a dream of establishing his own city. They, along with James Doty, the schemer and developer who had his own plan for the way things should go, had differing personalities and reasons for settling here. Jones, Reed, and Doty were all land speculators.

Many of the first settlers were the kind of men who held within themselves the seeds of discontent. It was these seeds which had moved them from the East to the newly opened territory of Wisconsin. Young and aggressive, these new settlers tended to overlook the development and operation of government in their competition over land acquisition.

Americans of the early 19th century in general were certain their country would develop into a role of world leadership. They had watched their country grow from its foundling position to one of leadership in only a few short years. Americans worked eagerly to improve their own lot. They felt it was their mission to carry to the world "the idea of the equality of all men". They also felt theirs was a "call" to cast off old community ties and move elsewhere to establish a new order, which frequently was anything but orderly. In the course of a few short years, newly formed villages and towns began to spring up across the American continent with little direction and little precedence. They mushroomed so rapidly that public services were, for all practical purposes, left to the "gods to provide".

When an American town felt its growing pains, it could have turned to Europe for models because England, Holland, and Germany had by that time developed well-governed municipalities. The European countries themselves were separated and struggling for creation of some form of unified government which did not depend on the whim of a prince or king. European cities, on the other hand, were largely self-governing communities and, while corruption was rampant, each city was chartered and had legal powers of government locally.

American cities, by contrast, had little local autonomy. They operated on the basis of grants from the territorial, and later the state, government. This government chartered private businesses to build bridges, dams, plank roads, canals, steamboats, and other enterprises, rather than leave those responsibilities to local government. A city was a corporation, a creature of the state legislature. Authoritative control was not in the city but in the state, so that local self-
A Tale of Twin Cities

government barely existed. Prior to 1850 there were almost no cities. Cities came upon the new west unawares and prior to the Civil War people took little interest in public administration.

As new cities were incorporated in the West, they paid little attention to the town government established in the East (anything Eastern was suspect) and even less to city governments of Europe. The only concepts western towns incorporated into their government was the idea of township division and the idea of free public education. The promise of self-government preceded the westward movement and self-government it would be, although this would often create chaos and conflict.

Optimism was the spirit of the day in this young country astonishingly close to its origin. This spirit sprang up especially strongly in two types of men: those filled with the love of adventure and those filled with the desire to make money on speculation in the West. Thus began the movement of enterprising men into the newly opened territory of Wisconsin.

This was a period of unquestionable speculation in the new land. Real estate was the speculator’s dream in the 1830’s. Three-fourths of Wisconsin land went to developers. Among the most active was James Doty who was planning and promoting town sites, most notably Madison as the state capitol. Also among his plans was the area at the mouth of the Fox, including what has come to be known as Doty’s Island.

The promise of western land sold on easy terms with low taxes, safety of investment, and the spirit of adventure lured young men of all kinds. Any man could own a piece of property - a place of his own. The lure was irresistible for men like Jones, Reed, Doty and others who came to this particular spot at this particular time in history.

The success of speculators’ dreams depended on their aggressiveness and the availability of capital. Also their success hung largely on the locations they had chosen. Here they had an ideal spot which included a source of both water power and water transportation. These would inevitably result in growth in numbers of people and value of the land. Enterprising men moved into the newly opened territory looking for a good return and/or a position of leadership.

It would be well to pause here to think about changes which had taken place in the ruling of the territory. One of the provisions of the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, out of which the state and, eventually, the counties and townships emerged, was the copying of the eastern plan to create divisions of government.
A Tale of Twin Cities Continues

By the survey of 1787 townships were laid out six miles square. Each township was divided into sections, each containing 640 acres and readily divisible into half-sections, quarter sections or smaller. The Ordinance set up a Territorial Legislature and provided for the admission to the union as a state, which in Wisconsin was not to occur until 1848.

While divisions of land into counties and townships were established by the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, Winnebago County was not set apart from Brown County until January 6, 1840. With the creation of Winnebago County, the matter of location of the county seat became important. Butte des Morts, Oshkosh, and Neenah all had their advocates. The matter was not decided until 1850, when Oshkosh was confirmed as the county seat. Meanwhile the township of Neenah was defined and organized February 11, 1847, by an act of the Territorial Legislature. It embraced the present Town of Neenah, plus the present Towns of Menasha, Vinland, and Clayton. Two years later the towns of Vinland and Clayton were split off and given independent status. In 1855 the present Town of Menasha was taken from the original Town of Neenah. The Village of Menasha was constituted by the county government on July 5, 1853, while still within the township of Neenah. This arrangement created problems of where town meetings were to be held. Menasha objected to the practice of always holding meetings in Neenah and organized to refuse to appear at a town meeting. "Neenahites" then objected to having to cross muddy roads to appear at the meetings in Menasha.

The separation of the four townships was guided by section lines. When it came to Doty Island, the division along section lines would have meant either Neenah or Menasha getting the biggest portion with only a sliver for the other. It becomes easy to follow the thinking of the legislators to follow a half-section line which almost evenly divided the island. There was no Nicolet Boulevard then but merely a wagon road connecting Neenah’s bridge (1850) and Menasha’s (1852).

One of the acts that seemed to clinch the division of the two communities was the action of the Winnebago County Board in 1855. An interesting editorial in the January 18, 1855, Menasha Advocate cites objection to the action of the board and further illuminates the tension between the two growing communities.

Beginning in 1851, periodic attempts had been made by politicians and some office seekers to divide the remaining part of the Town of Neenah into two townships. The underlying cause of this seemed to be to allow the Town of
A Tale of Twin Cities

Neenah to tax its citizens in order to improve roads and bridges. Taxation came through the county and funds were distributed to the various townships. Neenah felt it was not getting its share and would like to do its own taxing for its own use. Menasha had raised its own funds to pay for its roads and bridges and did not feel the need for county funds. It resented what it feared would be greater taxation.

The excuse given by the backers of the separation was that "the two sides of the river were rival interests and to allay the excitement growing out of such rivalry, it was necessary to divide the town". By dividing the two rivals they would end the fighting once and for all, proponents argued. It is difficult to justify such reasoning. The public turned down the idea at the polls. Instead of ending the conflict it would merely move them to a wider scene.

In January of 1855, without public notice, meetings, or consultation, a petition was initiated and within 12 hours of its inception, was presented to the County Board. The power behind the petition was J. B. Hamilton, who was Neenah's first village president after it was legally incorporated. He was accused by the Menasha Advocate of generating strife, exciting jealousy, and forming a bone of contention. According to the article of January 18, 1855, the writer states, "A more high-handed act of oppression - a more unauthorized and illegitimate exercise of power, we have never known". It does seem that there was little or no public input into the decision. Hamilton is reported to have stated that the people of the town were not competent to determine their own destiny. The Menasha Advocate called him the "King of Pettifoggers", a name of derision. The County Board, tired of hearing of the concerns of the two towns, declared it would solve the problem by legally separating the townships. The board passed the division and the former Town of Neenah became the towns of Neenah, Menasha, along with the already formed towns of Vinland and Clayton. They continue this pattern today.

While Menashans objected to the division because they feared the County Board would impose greater taxes on them, they could feel good about one correction of the Board. Menasha had frequently complained that they had very little representation. With the new arrangement, each town would have equal numbers on the Board. The old complaint of where town meetings were to be held would disappear as well. Each would hold its own town meeting. The villages and towns were to continue their separation into the future. The act of
A Tale of Twin Cities Continues

dividing the townships of Neenah and Menasha perhaps cemented, for all times, the division between them.

When one considers the lack of precedence in establishing civil government, especially at a town or village level; when one sees men of good intentions but no experience in self-governing; when one looks at the newness of the westward movement and the opening of undeveloped lands with the attendant concerns, it is little wonder that errors, bickering, and even dishonesty were prevalent in the development of the two cities. The land of opportunity was the land of competitiveness as well.

The bickering took place at town meetings and in newspaper columns. The scrapping was really "small time". There was no bloodshed and most controversy was civilized. No one was killed in the struggle for power between the communities. There were "tricks" of meanness like the letting of cows out of pastures and the removal of a machine shop on a barge one night. (The same shop was stolen back a short time later.) There do not seem to have been mean-spirited attempts by either side to stir up the citizens to angry action. Each seemed to accept the presence of the other.

Fault cannot be found with our ancestors. One can actually applaud their resourcefulness and even the conniving which went into the development of these individual cities. The cities' history in the early days was rugged and stormy by modern standards, but the end product was two cities which have managed to grow and live side by side, each with its own personality.

History turns on a decision, an action, or a series of accidental happenings. Frequently one can contemplate what might have been. What if Doty's strong personality had not been associated with Menasha? What if he had not been such a conniving person? What if Harvey Jones had lived instead of dying so young and what if he had left a will? What if Curtis Reed had not succeeded in getting the government canal in Menasha? What if J. B. Hamilton had not been able to influence the County Board to divide the towns? What if a retail center had not developed in each community but instead one business district had sprung up in Doty's proposed Island City? What happened in reality was that Neenah and Menasha were destined to become one in many aspects; but they continue to be two in history, government, and even individuality.
A Tale of Twin Cities

Thus the tale of twin cities continues - even as all history continues. The citizens of these communities must be grateful to the men of vision who saw that this was a place of beauty and opportunity and struggled here with a sense of purpose to establish the cities of Neenah and Menasha, Wisconsin.

Caryl Herziger

Neenah vs Menasha.

We cannot but feel amused when we reflect seriously upon it, yet it is a source of exceeding great annoyance, at the excessive jealousies and environs between these two places. We are accused alternately by the one and by the other, of favoring the opposite place. Each one accuses us of intriguing for, and doing all we can to favor the other. When we are at Neenah, complaints are continually made to us about what we are doing for Menasha: and when we are at Menasha the same complaints are made in regard to Neenah.

The truth is, that we are not conscious of having a preference for either place. Pecuniariiy we get about as much support from one as from the other. Personally our friends in the one place number as many as in the other. They are rival towns, possessing similar and like advantages, and we certainly have, and can have no desire to see one succeed over the other. The rivalries between them are things with which we have nothing to do. As public journalists we have no right to meddle with them. We will do all we can legitimately for the prosperity of both places, but nothing for one as against the other.

We wish our friends in these two places would look at this matter as it is.

These remarks are called out at this time, because the County Board is in session this week, and both Neenah and Menasha are applying for Pleasure Charters, reaching to Omro. We have been charged by each with lobbying with the members in favor of the charter of the other. Neenah is applying for a division of the Town to be set off in a Town by itself, disconnected with Menasha—and Neenah friends have charged us with intriguing with the members in opposition to the application.

Editorial in a Menasha newspaper of the day.