CHAPTER I.

Genesis—1836-1838.

The immediate and lasting effects of the Black Hawk War (1832) were not only the humbling of the Indians of Northern Illinois and what afterwards became Southern Wisconsin, but the wide advertising of the country through which the contest had been waged. During and soon after the war, the newspapers of the Eastern States were filled with descriptions, more or less florid, of the scenic charms of the Rock River Valley, the groves and prairies on every hand, the park-like district of the Four Lakes, the Wisconsin River highlands, and the picturesque hills and almost impenetrable forests of Western Wisconsin. Books and pamphlets by the score were issued from the press, giving accounts of the newly-discovered paradise, and soon a tide of immigration set thither. Then necessarily followed, in short season, the survey and opening to sale of public lands heretofore reserved, and the purchase of what hunting grounds were still in possession of Indian tribes. The development of the theatre of war thus received a sudden and enormous impetus, so that when the country west of Lake Michigan was divorced from Michigan Territory in 1836, and reared into the independent Territory of Wisconsin, there were about twelve thousand whites within the borders of the nascent commonwealth; and many of the sites of future cities of our State were already occupied by agricultural settlers, isolated or in tiny groups.

Green Bay, a struggling French-Canadian settlement, by this time hoary with age, had come down from the seventeenth century, maintaining a sickly existence on the fur-trade and the lake traffic; Forts Howard (at Green Bay), Winnebago (at Portage), and Crawford (at Prairie du Chien) were surrounded by meagre hamlets, chiefly of French Creoles; the lead-mining region in the southwest, although sparsely settled, contained the bulk of the population, with Mineral Point as its center—a village having at the time an apparently brighter prospect than the new settlement at the mouth of Milwaukee River; there were a few notches carved, at wide intervals, from the gloomy forest bordering the western shore of Lake Michigan; but outside of the settlements just enumerated, Wisconsin was practically uninhabited by the whites. Here and there was to be found an Indian trader, the Yankee successor of the courrier de bois of the old French regime, or some exceptionally adventurous farmer; but their far-separated cabins only emphasized the density of the wilderness, through which roamed untrammeled the shiftless, gipsy-like aborigines—the comparatively harmless Chippewas, Menomonees, Pottawatomies, and Winnebagoes.

In the summer of 1836 there were, so far as is now known, but five white men residing within the region comprised in the present county of Dane: Ebenezer Brigham, the original Dane county settler, at the East Blue Mound; Eben Peck, who lived with Brigham, boarding the in 1836. latter and his farming and lead-mining hands, and entertaining chance travelers along the military highway between Forts Crawford and Winnebago; Berry Haney, a ranchman squating on the military road at what is now Cross Plains; a Frenchman named Olivier Armel, who maintained a temporary trading shanty, half brush and half canvas, near what we call Johnson street, on the wooded isthmus between Lakes Monona and Mendota; and Abel Rasdall,
an Indian trader, whose lonely cabin was on the eastern shore of Lake Kegonsa, about half a mile north of its outlet. A French half-breed trader, Michel St. Cyr, lived on the bank of Lake Mendota at what are to-day known as Livesey’s Springs, three-fourths of a mile north of Pheasant Branch.

July 4, the Territorial government was organized,¹ with Henry Dodge as governor. The first Territorial legislature convened October 25 in the newly-platted village of Belmont, at Platte Mounds, in what is now La Fayette county. The two houses met in a story-and-a-half frame building, battlement-fronted; the highway which it faced bristled with stumps, while lead-miners’ shafts and prospectors’ holes thickly dimpled the shanty neighborhood.² At this session, Dane county was set off, among eleven others; and the Territorial capital was established at Madison — then a town on paper. A month had been spent in skirmishing on the capital location question, the principal contestants being Milwaukee, Racine, Koshkonong, City of the Second Lake, City of the Four Lakes, Madison, Fond du Lac, Peru, Wisconsin City, Portage, Helena, Belmont, Mineral Point, Platteville, Cassville, Bellevue, and Dubuque; and it was not until November 24 that the act of establishment was passed. Madison (so named from James Madison, then president of the United States) was selected among the many eager applicants, because its choice was in the nature of a compromise between the conflicting interests

¹The Territory then embraced what is now Minnesota, Iowa, and a considerable region still farther westward.

²The building still stands, in use as a barn, but the village itself has almost faded from sight.
of Green Bay and the mining country; because it was midway between the settlements on the Mississippi River and on Lake Michigan, and would thus assist in developing the interior; because of the natural beauty of the site — but chiefly because James Duane Doty, who had just retired from the judgesship of the Wisconsin division of Michigan Territory, had, in connection with Stevens T. Mason, then governor of Michigan, purchased a wild tract of 1261 acres, of which the present Capitol Park is the center, and fought for the supremacy of their projected town with most remarkable tenacity. Madison city lots are said to have been freely distributed among members, their friends, and others supposed to possess influence with them.

It was stipulated in the act, that the legislature should meet in Burlington (now in Iowa) until March 4, 1839, unless the public building at Madison, which was provided for, should sooner be completed. James D. Doty, John F. O'Neill, and Augustus A. Bird were chosen building commissioners.

Moses M. Strong commenced in February to plat the town site in the neighborhood of the Capitol Park, at a time when the ground was covered quite deep with snow. He was assisted in the work by John Catlin, who had, a few months previous, been appointed postmaster of the embryo city. Catlin employed the half-breed St. Cyr to erect a log house for him on the site of the present postoffice, north corner Mifflin street and Wisconsin avenue. The body of the structure was put together in February — the first attempt to get a permanent building here — but it was not roofed and finished until summer.

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1 The soldiers and militiamen who, in 1832, painfully trudged through the broad marshes which in places abut our lakes, were inclined to scoff at the beauties of the proposed capital. In his History of the Black Hawk War, published in 1834, J. A. Wakefield, a militiaman, gives this description of the Four Lakes country, which is amusing in the light of present conditions:

"Here it may not be uninteresting to the reader to give a small outline of these lakes. From a description of the country, a person would very naturally suppose that those lakes were as little pleasing to the eye of the traveler as the country is. But not so. I think they are the most beautiful bodies of water I ever saw. The first one that we came to, was about ten miles in circumference, and the water as clear as crystal. The earth sloped back in a gradual rise; the bottom of the lake appeared to be entirely covered with white pebbles, and no appearance of its being the least swampy. The second one that we came to appeared to be much larger. It must have been twenty miles in circumference. The ground rose very high all round; and the heaviest kind of timber grew close to the water's edge. If these lakes were anywhere else except in the country they are, they would be considered among the wonders of the world. But the country they are situated in, is not fit for any civilized nation of people to inhabit. It appears that the Almighty intended it for the children of the forest. The other two lakes we did not get close enough to, for me to give a description of them; but those who saw them stated that they were very much like the others."

2 The lands in the vicinity were first surveyed for the government, in December, 1834, by Orson Lyon, deputy U. S. surveyor. In the summer or autumn of 1835, William B. Slaughter entered the tract occupied by St. Cyr, at Livesey's Springs, and December 29 conveyed an interest therein to Judge Doty, who had it surveyed and platted (probably in June, 1836) for a projected city which he styled "City of the Four Lakes;" this he entered in competition for the capital, along with his proposed city of Madison, on the isthmus — thus having two strings to his bow. When Madison seemed the favorite of the two, he centered his fight on the latter, and the City of the Four Lakes never developed beyond the paper stage. As will be seen below, Madison was not actually platted until February, 1837.

Another paper city of the neighborhood, also an aspirant for the prize of the capital, was the "City of the Second Lake." The Milwaukee Advertiser, of July 21, 1836, says this name is a "somewhat lengthy cognomen of a new town that is about being laid off in the interior of our Territory." The Advertiser says the proposed city is "beautifully situated upon the site of an ancient Winnebago village at the outlet of the second of the far-famed Four Lakes. Judging from its position upon the map, we should say that the day is not far distant when this will be an inconsiderable place of business. It is on a direct line from this city to Cassville, and about equidistant between Peckatonica and Winnebago Portage; surrounded by a healthy and rich farming country, and may soon be the seat of justice of a county, and who knows but of a State."

3 The park itself was surveyed in the summer of 1837, by Franklin Hathaway (now of Chicago), a nephew of Joshua Hathaway, of Milwaukee. In a letter to the writer, he thus describes Madison, as he then found it: "The ground between the third and fourth lakes was covered with a moderately heavy growth of timber, and an undergrowth of hazel and other bushes, quite dense in some places."
On their way home from the Belmont session, which had adjourned on December 9, several of the northern members of the legislature stopped at the Blue Mound and informed landlord Peck of the selection of Madison as the Capital. Thereupon Peck conceived the idea of opening a house of entertainment for the accommodation of visitors to the proposed seat of government, and of the workmen whom he heard were soon to be sent out to erect the public building. With that end in view, he purchased some lots on which to build his prospective tavern, and in March sent on two Frenchmen to raise the house, the first inhabited building in Madison. April 15, 1837, Peck, with his wife Roseline, and their two-year old boy, Victor E., arrived on the scene, the pioneer white family at the Capital. This primitive tavern, which was practically three log-cabins united, was styled the Madison House, and stood upon lot 6, block 107 (on the southwest side of Butler street), until, old and crumbling, it was (1857) torn down to make room for a more modern building.

On the morning of missioner Bird arrived from Milwaukee, with workmen, after a dreary overland journey of ten mud, with no roads, and the intervening rivers. Pierce, with his wife and family in the place. The by Bird to cook for the purpose they erected a log corner of Butler and Wil southeast of the Pecks, majority of the workmen Peck’s tavern being pa Pierce had two grown-up Marcia by name; Rhoda mistress of the settle of the Capitol was laid priate toasts and speeches’ torial officials.

John Stoner and wife, with Prosper B. Bird, brother one of his original party, deduced his wife and three

On September 6, came their seven children. Early of A. A., and families. soon after intro children to the colonists. A. A. Bird brought out his wife and six children to the scene of action, late in December or early in January. On September 14 had occurred at the Madison House the first white birth on the isthmus — Wisconsiana Victoria Peck, now the widow of Nels W. Wheeler, of Baraboo. A little later, James Madison Stoner made his appearance, the first white boy born

1 Mrs. Peck now lives at Baraboo, in her ninety-second year. Her son, Victor E., is manager of the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railway Hotel at West Madison. Eben Peck started overland to California in 1845, and is supposed to have been killed by Indians on the plains.

2 With Bird’s party came Darwin Clark, as one of the carpenters; he afterwards taught the village school. The late Simeon Mills, long prominently identified with educational interests in Madison, arrived in the afternoon of the same day, having walked out of Chicago, via Janesville and Winnequah. Mills began serving as deputy postmaster on the fourth of July, conducting the office in connection with a general store which he had opened upon his arrival. Mr. Clark died February 12, 1899.

3 The Pierce family remained in Madison but two years, and then moved to Green county.
THE FIRST HOUSE IN MADISON
Built by the Pecks in 1837, to accommodate the builders of the Territorial Capitol.
From photograph of a painting based on memory of old residents.
in the settlement. The families of Peck, Stoner, Prosper B. Bird, and A. A. Bird, Isaac H. Palmer and wife, the few workmen on the Capitol who had not returned to Milwaukee, two or three shop-keepers and officials, the little cluster of families at the Blue Mounds, the Haney household at Cross Plains, and perhaps three or four widely-separated Indian traders, constituted the entire white population of Dane county during the winter of 1837–38.

The little colony in Madison did not lack for amusement during this period, despite the physical barriers between it and the civilized world to the far East. Mrs. Peck has given us, in Durrie’s History of Madison, a lively account of the dances, euchre parties, turtle-soup suppers, etc., with which the settlers whiled away the first winter in the Four-Lakes wilderness. She and her brother-in-law, Luther Peck, both appear to have been excellent violinists, and the puncheon floors of the Madison House were worn smooth with semi-weekly reels and “monie-musk” numbers, with impromptu “settling,” as one of the prime attractions. Overland travelers from Winnebago, Galena, and the gay society at Wisconsin, described and praised the schoolteacher, in the person of Miss Brayton, of Madison, who was engaged at a weekly salary of two dollars, one person, in teaching, on March 1, 1838, in the front end of dwelling-house, on lot 5, King and Clymer streets, every store. In these limits the thickest, two blocks houses, she assembled her fifteen children. The with the bark on, roughly-auger holes serving as legs. With a chair for the teacher, this outfit completed the equipment of Madison’s first temple of learning. The teacher was a young woman of dignified presence, and the firm but sweet disposition. The curriculum, however, was as crude as the surroundings. Only the merest rudiments of education were aimed at in the backwoods schools of those days; they lacked appliances and proper text-books, there was no well-defined system of district government, no school-fund, and the county treasury was often barren. The teachers were, as a rule, those young men and women in the pioneer families who were imbued with an ambitious spirit and chance to understand “the three E’s” a trifle better than their fellows. The professionally-educated schoolmaster was not then abroad—he did not reach Madison until a dozen or more years later. There are probably few schools to-day, in the most inaccessible portions of our country, so meagerly equipped as the majority of those scattered at wide intervals throughout the Northwest, in the period of which we treat.