A BRIEF OUTLINE OF WISCONSIN HISTORY

JOSSEPH SCHAFFER
Superintendent of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin

The Physical Basis

WISCONSIN is described by the geologist as a very ancient land. He assigns to it a geological age of about fifteen million years. This, to be sure, is only a kind of estimate; also, it is probably an average of the ages of different rock formations, for there is an older, mountainous formation in the north and a newer plain-land in the south. The mountains, in the course of ages, have been so denuded and worn down by erosion that they have now become nearly a plain also, or what the geologist calls a penepaln.

One of the most potent forces operating to modify the surface features of the land was the glacier. The glacial ice sheet forming in the far north moved over the greater part of the state, retreated, advanced, retreated and advanced yet again, before it was finally forced, by the moderating climate, to retire into the Arctic regions. When the glacier had done its work the surface of Wisconsin which was affected by it was nearly as we know it today. But by a strange freak of the forces which controlled the glacial movement, it missed entirely one large section of the state. That section, because it remains free from glacial drift, such as bowlders and gravel, is called the Driftless Area. It includes in Wisconsin the counties of Lafayette, Iowa, Grant, Crawford, Richland, Vernon, LaCrosse, and Trempealeau, also portions of Buffalo, Eau Claire, Jackson, Monroe, Sauk, Dane, Green, and Marathon. It also extends into the neighboring states of Minnesota, Iowa, and Illinois, though 13,360 of its 15,000 square miles lie within the boundaries of our state. In most of the Driftless Area the plain or plateau has been deeply eroded,
forming level-floored valleys with high bordering hills or bluffs. The drainage is in form tree-like (dendritic), the main valley being like the trunk of a tree, the small tributary valleys like the branches. There are no lakes in the Driftless Area, and few places requiring artificial drainage to carry off surface water. In the glaciated area drainage is irregular and imperfect, leaving many lakes and marshes; the surface, while diversified with moraines of several types and showing the effects of earlier erosion processes, is less hilly because the deeper valleys have been partly filled by glacial action and the hills planed down. On the whole, the glaciated area has a larger per cent of cultivable land than the Driftless, although in some sections glacial lakes and marshes are numerous and extensive. The greatest abundance of lakes is found on the headwaters of Wisconsin river and along the upper streams of the St. Croix.

The mountain land, now the great northern peneplain, together with considerable areas of the crescentic plain adjoining it on the south, east, and west, was once heavily timbered, largely with conifers. This has been the lumbering region, par excellence, though other parts of the state, both in the southeast and in the southwest, had plenty of timber for the uses of the white settlers when they began to arrive. Some portions of southern Wisconsin, however, were nearly destitute of timber save along the water courses. These were the "prairies" which seemed so bleak to the pioneer home makers that for some years they avoided them, preferring the oak openings for farming purposes. The prairies, however, have proved exceedingly rich farming lands, and the ease and quickness with which they could be brought under cultivation gave the prairie farmers a distinct advantage over those who settled in the dense woods. It was the prairies and openings which made Wisconsin so great a producer of wheat in the pioneer period. Vast deposits of copper and iron ore are found in the Archean rocks of the northern peneplain, while the Galena limestone formation in the southwest is the source of the lead and zinc deposits for which Wisconsin, with adjacent parts of Illinois and Iowa, has long been famous. Lead mining, indeed, drew the earliest considerable emigration to Wisconsin, in the years following 1827.
The Primitive Human Background

The Indian mounds, scattered widely over the state, furnish proof that ages before the coming of white men Wisconsin contained a varied and somewhat advanced primitive culture. From the advent of white men in the region, of whom the Frenchman Jean Nicolet, who came from Canada by way of Lake Huron, Lake Michigan and Green Bay in 1634, was the first, the Indian life was modified by two great influences—wars and commerce. The wars carried on beyond the eastern frontier, and sometimes in the territory itself, by the Iroquois Indians of western New York, drove the Hurons and Ottawas, as well as the Sauk, Foxes, and Potawatomi, into Wisconsin, while the Sioux on the upper Mississippi invaded the country from the west. These pressures from opposite sides tended, in historic times, to concentrate the Wisconsin tribes along the great interior waterways of the state, the Green Bay-Fox and Wisconsin line, which afforded safety from enemies by providing a way of escape under almost all circumstances. This concentration of the tribes also facilitated the work of the French missionaries who followed, as friends and protectors, the refugee bands of Hurons fleeing from the Iroquois enemy.\(^1\) The Indian trade was also begun by the French, who carried it on at first through agents at Montreal, later through trading establishments located at strategic points in the country itself. Green Bay and Prairie du Chien, at the opposite ends of the Fox-Wisconsin waterway, became the leading French posts for carrying on trade with the Indians, while a post on Chequamegon Bay gathered the fur harvest of Lake Superior.

By the terms of the Treaty of Paris, 1763, France was dispossessed and Great Britain came into control of the whole north country. Twenty years later, at the close of the American Revolution, another treaty of Paris formally transferred the Wisconsin region to the United States. British companies operating from Canada were able to reap most of the benefits of the trade until after the close of the War of 1812, when the American Fur Company, of which John Jacob Astor was the head, took control. Through all these changes, however, most of the men who actually came in contact commercially

with the Indians continued to be French. The French had long been accustomed to the business; their trappers, hunters, and voyageurs were glad to take service under English and Americans, and many of their more intelligent young men became clerks and factors in the English and American trading companies. To the Indians, therefore, changes of sovereignty made but little difference. It was mainly the French-Canadians of the fur trade tradition who formed the little colonies at Green Bay, Prairie du Chien, and other points in the state which gave so picturesque a feature to early Wisconsin history and, on the entrance of the settlers from New England, made the first of our race questions.\(^2\) The fur trade brought the native tribes under the domination of white men, tempered their warlike spirit, and disintegrated their organization for offensive action. The absence of Indian wars, when white settlers entered—except the numerically insignificant Black Hawk War—is largely attributable to the Indian trade carried on for two centuries by the tactful French. A pleasing reminder of the French régime in Wisconsin is the prevalence of musical French place names, rather numerous interspersed with names having an Indian origin and the more common English names.

**American Beginners**

The fur trade "managed by Americans but almost wholly manned by French"\(^3\) continued to be the principal industry of Wisconsin until 1834. In that year land offices were opened at Green Bay and at Mineral Point, and settlers began to pour in through the port at Milwaukee, also by way of Chicago, up the Mississippi, and overland from the settled parts of Illinois, Kentucky, Indiana, and Ohio.

Wisconsin was late in settling because the earlier westward migration had been largely directed and controlled by the Ohio river.\(^4\) The Erie Canal, opened in 1825, made a new line of emigration from the northeast, and in a few years northern Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and southern Michigan were receiving their thousands of immigrants yearly. Only the lead region in the southwestern part of our state had received

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\(^3\) Ibid.

\(^4\) See population map, United States Census for 1830, in *Blue Book*, 1921, 7.
considerable numbers before the Black Hawk War in 1832. That event, preceded and followed by Indian land cessions, opened the entire southern portion of Wisconsin to agricultural settlement as far as the line of the Wisconsin, Fox river, and Green Bay, and in the four years 1832-36 that region was fully surveyed into townships, sections, and subdivisions of sections. So rapid were the sales, both to settlers and to speculators, that by December 1, 1836, nearly 900,000 acres had been sold. The census of 1836 showed in that part of the newly created Wisconsin Territory lying east of the Mississippi a total population of 11,683, of which 5,234 were in Iowa county (comprising nearly the entire lead region), 2,706 in Brown county (including Green Bay), 2,893 in Milwaukee county, and 850 in Crawford county (Prairie du Chien).

5 The Territory, when it was set off from Michigan, July 3, 1836, included what afterwards became the states of Iowa and Minnesota, together with parts of the Dakotas east of the Missouri and White Earth rivers.
Southern Wisconsin

The most rapid settlement occurred in those portions of southeastern and southern Wisconsin which were tributary to the Lake Michigan ports and which being lightly timbered permitted the easy conversion of the raw lands into farms. Racine and Kenosha, Walworth, Rock, parts of Waukesha and Jefferson, and parts of Green and Dane counties were at first the favored regions. A little later came the movement into the fertile open lands of Fond du Lac and Columbia counties, while the lead region, being farther from lake transportation, developed less rapidly. The building of railways which began in 1849 tended to equalize the advantages of different sections and caused settlers to swarm over all of the rich lands in the southern part of the state, even for some distance north and west of the Fox-Wisconsin line. By 1870, an important turning point in Wisconsin agricultural history because of the change from wheat growing as a business to dairy farming, the state was fairly well settled south of a line drawn from Green Bay to Hudson on the St. Croix river, except for a southward dip of the forested area in Waupaca, Portage, Adams, Waushara, Wood, Clark, and Eau Claire counties. Compared with the population map of 1850, when settlement was almost exclusively south and east of the Fox-Wisconsin line, the map of 1870 shows a broad strip of agricultural set-
tlement along the Mississippi in Crawford, Richland, Juneau, Monroe, Jackson, Buffalo, Trempealeau, Pepin, St. Croix, and portions of Eau Claire and Polk counties. There was also an extension north of Fox river, in Outagamie, Waupaca, Winnebago, Waushara, Green Lake, and Marquette counties, with smaller portions of Adams and Juneau.  

For a time the people came mainly from the northeastern and central states. Nearly one-fourth (68,000) of the total population in 1850 were natives of New York. Vermont and Pennsylvania furnished approximately 10,000 each, and as many more came from the other New England states, while several thousand came from the more southerly middle states, making a total from the Northeast and East of 103,000. There were 21,367 Northwesterners, which means persons born in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Michigan; and 5,425 from the South and Southwest. Of Wisconsin nativity there were 63,000, most of them doubtless minor children of the emigrants from other American states, since foreign emigration to Wisconsin at that time was only well begun. There were, however, in 1850, nearly 48,000 English-speaking foreigners, of whom 21,000 were Irish and 19,000 English; and 57,600 non-English-speaking foreigners. Of the latter, Germans constituted 38,000, Scandinavians 8,900, Swiss 1,244, Dutch 1,157, and French-Canadians 8,277. All of the twenty-six counties of 1850 had majorities of American born, except Milwaukee, Manitowoc and Washington, where foreigners were most numerous. Practically, early Wisconsin was a child of New England, New Yorkers being mainly New Englanders of a later generation. In the constitutional convention which was held in 1846 out of 121 members there were 46 natives of New York, 21 of Vermont, and 9 each of Connecticut and Massachusetts.  

Territorial Politics, 1836-1848

The dominant intellectual interest in territorial Wisconsin was politics, which is not strange when we recall the names of such public men as James D. Doty, Henry Dodge, William S. Hamilton, Morgan L. Martin, and Thomas P. Burnett, to mention only a few of the leaders. These men kept political

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6 See maps, Blue Book, 1921, 10-11, showing expansion of population from 1850 to 1870.
7 Reuben G. Thwaites, Wisconsin, 337-338.
questions to the fore so successfully that private citizens could not avoid giving them some attention, and thus the foundations were laid for a society which in more recent times has been characterized as intensely political. Relations with the national government, and with our neighbors, Michigan and Illinois, land grants, internal improvements, the location of the capital, the fixing of the southern boundary, the numerous referendums on the question of a state government, the two constitutional conventions of 1846 and 1847—these were some of the concrete problems agitating the minds of voters during the period. When, on May 29, 1848, the bill granting statehood to Wisconsin was approved by President Polk, a complete state government, elected the same month, was ready to take up the reins laid down by territorial officials,

Expansion, Trade, War—1848-1865

Wisconsin began her career as a state in the Union with a population of nearly a quarter of a million. By 1850 that number had increased to 305,391, and by 1860 to 775,881. In spite of the losses and the general retardation of immigration, due to the Civil War, the census of 1870 shows 1,054,670. The period was characterized by agricultural expansion. This was favored by the building of railroads through new regions and by the economic advantage (or necessity, it might be called) of pushing wheat culture into ever fresh portions of the virgin soil of the state as the older lands responded more and more grudgingly to primitive modes of cultivation. The business of lumbering, in the great “pineries” of the north, came in this epoch into full development; and in the years immediately following the war, often called “the golden age of lumbering,” Wisconsin was ready to dispute with Michigan for the cream of the trade. Milwaukee flourished more and more as a wheat shipping port, her population rising from 31,077 in 1850 to 89,936 in 1870. Farming (which meant wheat growing), lumbering, and general commerce, together with mining, constituted the industrial basis of Wisconsin’s prosperity.

Politically, the state of Wisconsin began with the Democratic party in control, and it was not till 1856 that a change came. In that year the state senate, elected in 1855, was Republican; and it was judicially decided, after a fierce and
vindictive struggle, that Governor Barstow, Democrat, who resumed office on a certificate of election being issued to him, had not been rightfully elected, whereupon Coles Bashford, Republican, became governor March 24, 1856. That ended the control of state politics by the old, pro-slavery democracy. In 1860 Wisconsin gave the Lincoln electors a plurality of 21,089. The war came with a shock, but it found the spirit of Wisconsin ready. "Wisconsin promptly and efficiently met every demand made upon her during the gigantic struggle; her quota of troops was always more than full; and although at times the fiscal situation seemed desperate, no question arose as to the wisdom of making liberal provision for the military chest."

This period was also noted for the building up of public institutions—the state university, the normal school, the system of free elementary schools, and the beginnings of our high school system. The management of the university and school lands, and the loaning of the funds, constituted an important and not altogether creditable feature of the state activities of the time. These things had much to do with the anti-Barstow agitation of 1853 to 1856.

Progress and Readjustment—1865-1890

Wisconsin furnished to the nation's armies a total of 91,379 men. Out of this number she lost, by death, 10,752. During the progress of the war, general immigration and especially immigration from Germany, formerly so heavy, was largely cut off. So, the total gain in population between 1860 and 1865 was only 12 per cent. In the next period of five years it was 21 per cent. This showed that with the close of the war all the elements of prosperity became once more fully operative, and now both European and eastern emigration were resumed on a grand scale. During the same time Wisconsin was sending thousands of ex-soldiers and others into the prairie states of Kansas, Nebraska, Iowa, and Minnesota, which enjoyed such a phenomenal growth. By 1890 a quarter of a million natives of Wisconsin were living in these and other western states. It was these new settlements which were

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largely responsible for ushering in the golden era of lumbering, through the rapid expansion of the market for lumber, and it was these same new states, with their limitless expanse of fertile, unspoiled wheat land, which gave the coup de grace to wheat growing as a profitable branch of farming in the older Wisconsin. Consequently, the period under review was for Wisconsin a time of economic and social readjustment. It involved a change in agriculture from wheat growing to dairying and other forms of permanent (fertility renewing) agriculture; a gigantic progress in lumbering, under the stimulus of ample markets and good prices, and the rise of the lumber kings as a power in the state, sometimes in alliance with the railway kings; the rapid slaughtering of the forests and the necessity, in many lumbering centers, of organizing industries and building up agriculture as a support for communities left stranded by the ebbing tide of lumbering; the diversification of general manufactories, induced partly by the later decline of lumbering, partly by favoring conditions like water power and wood for pulp and paper making, and iron ore for the manifold forms of iron manufacturing. The capitalist and labor classes in industry as distinguished from that earlier society when "not only did everyone work, but almost everyone worked with his hands and almost everyone worked for himself," developed with manufacturing. It was a new and different Wisconsin in 1890, with problems even more complex, stubborn, and difficult than those of Civil War days, but fortunately with a public spirit among its people just as earnest in seeking solutions for those problems and with a public intelligence no less adequate to the new tasks than it had been to the old.

Northern Wisconsin

Thus far we have discussed, agriculturally, that portion of Wisconsin which lies mainly south of the line from Hudson to Green Bay, or southern and central Wisconsin. One might consider everything north of the Fox-Wisconsin line as part of northern Wisconsin. However, it has became customary in recent times to apply that geographic description only to

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the region north of the Hudson-Green Bay line already mentioned. At least, that region is the New North. It comprises twenty-nine counties or major fractions of counties. It has been built up almost entirely since the year 1870, and so far as agriculture is concerned, mainly since 1890. Lumbering created towns and cities in the heart of the pineries, and these attracted railroads, which began about 1870 to build through northern Wisconsin. Farmers, attracted by the good markets for agricultural produce which mill towns and lumber camps created, followed the sound of the steam whistle and occupied the open, lightly wooded, or burnt-over lands. With the progress of railway building and the exhaustion of the supply of fertile prairie lands in the west, the influx of farmers increased until northern Wisconsin became a new “land of promise” not only to emigrating Wisconsin people, but to people from other states and from foreign countries. According to the census of 1920, the twenty-nine counties of the New North contained more than one-third of the rural population of the state, and the rural population of those counties has been steadily increasing while that of other portions of the state has been stationary. Marathon, one of the northern counties, had in 1920 a larger rural population than any other county.

The Age of Science

To different onlookers the history of the last thirty years will mean different things. One can but guess how the future historian will characterize it. Whatever else he may say of Wisconsin society in this generation, he will not deny its tendency toward a scientific control of public as well as private business. This is, to be sure, a deep-running tendency of the age. Yet, among other democracies the people of Wisconsin—in their government, in their agricultural and other industries, in their conservation policies respecting human life, intelligence, and happiness, as also natural resources; in their educational systems and the functions these are permitted to exercise in relation to practical concerns; even in their reasoned if not always reasonable and sweet-tempered politics—afford one of the best illustrations of a society which is swayed by the scientific motive. The dominant note in Wisconsin
politics has been the attainment of social justice; and while
we have by no means banished selfishness, greed, and corrup-
tion from our public and our private life as a people, yet on
the whole it may be doubted if an equal number of voters
anywhere will deal more disinterestedly or discriminatingly
with public questions, employing in their solution not the un-
aided reason merely, but the best knowledge that science, in
its appropriate forms, can afford.

Best of all, the people have gained a definite conviction that
the future depends upon themselves. So they go forward, in
the spirit of their state song, On Wisconsin, planning, coöper-
ating, and if need be, battling, for the things which are con-
tributory to the highest social welfare.
PIONEER FOUNDERS OF GOVERNMENT IN WISCONSIN

(1) Governor Henry Dodge, 1836-1841-1845-1848; (2) Governor James Duane Doty, 1841-1844; (3) Governor Nathaniel P. Tallmadge, 1844-1845; (4) Col. W. S. Hamilton, Hamilton's Diggings; (5) Judge Morgan L. Martin, Green Bay.