



A Dane County wilderness roadway—sketched in 1852.

# Immigration of Irish to Dane County

On a crisp November day in 1842, two Irish immigrant brothers in their twenties drove a horse and buggy through oak woods along an Indian trail that ran from Janesville to Madison. As they entered the township that was to become known as Fitchburg, the young men pulled up their buggy at a small log hotel on the banks of a pond, where it is said that the skies overhead would blacken from time to time with immense flocks of migratory birds. The brothers were on a mission to look for land on which to build homesteads. A man named Harvey Bush, who had recently established one of the first farms in the township, offered to guide them to prime, unclaimed land two miles to the east. They rode out to view the property, which turned out to be gently rolling prairie land interspersed with oak groves. After canvassing the promising territory, Harvey Bush turned to the brothers and uttered his now legendary line: “[It’s] fine land, but in such an out-of-the-way place.”<sup>3</sup>

The brothers, George and Dr. William Fox, felt that the land would suit their needs and left for the Milwaukee land office where they purchased tracts from the government on November 18, 1842.<sup>4</sup> They returned to live in Fitchburg in June, 1843. With the arrival of additional pioneers, the development of the Irish agricultural settlement of Fitchburg was underway.

As for the skeptical guide, Harvey Bush, he left the township within a few years after the conversation on the prairie. Fitchburg may have been out-of-the-way at the time, but it easily survived the criticism and today is one of the fastest-growing cities in Wisconsin. To understand how Fitchburg and its Irish have come so far over the past 150 years, the early decades in the development of Wisconsin and Dane County need to be considered.

The Irish formed one of many ethnic groups that moved to the Wisconsin frontier during the years 1840 to 1860, when

individuals purchased much of the available land in southern Wisconsin from the federal government. The majority of Irish and other immigrants came to Dane County either directly from Europe, or after having lived for a while in Canada or on the East Coast.

The Irish reached Canadian or U.S. seaports often following six to eight weeks on a sickness-ridden vessel. Large numbers sought jobs and housing in such coastal cities as Boston and New York. Many of the Irish worked long hours for low pay in industrial sweatshops. Stereotypically, urban Irish were known for working as policemen and saloonkeepers, but in fact most were employed as laborers or factory workers.

Many of the Irish who moved inland from the East Coast were lured by the prospects of employment on railroad and canal construction projects. Later, some of those laborers chose to use their savings to buy farms either near the coast or on the frontier. They were joined by Irish who had enough cash in hand from the sale of property in Ireland to purchase an American farm. The federal government advertised that land was available in Wisconsin, and many Irish seized the opportunity.

Wisconsin Territory was organized out of the preceding Michigan Territory in 1836. Dane County was also formed that year, named for Nathaniel Dane, who helped draft the Northwest Ordinance which established government in the region where Wisconsin is today. The wilderness from which Madison grew was designated as the new capital of Wisconsin Territory in November, 1836. Madison, also the county seat, was named for a popular past president, James Madison, who had died earlier that year.

Wisconsin became a state in 1848 after years of increasing settlement. From 1840 to 1860, pioneers purchased land from the government and speculators, and they began farming on much of the arable land in Dane County. The population of Dane County underwent tremendous growth in these years.

In 1840 there were 314 residents in the county, but by 1860 there were 43,922; among these, 11 percent of the heads of households were natives of Ireland. The population in 1860 of the Town of Fitchburg was 1,177; approximately one-third of the heads of households in the township were born in Ireland.<sup>5</sup> (See Appendix A.)

The Irish were joined in their journey to Wisconsin by people of a variety of backgrounds, including German, Swiss, and Norwegian. Though fewer in number than some other ethnic groups, the Irish population in Wisconsin increased during the 1845-1855 potato Famine emigration from Ireland. Most Irish from the East Coast came by way of steamboat through the Great Lakes to Milwaukee, then by oxen team and wagon to their destination. Some Irish came overland by prairie schooner across Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois to reach Wisconsin Territory.

Irish who had arrived before 1840 worked primarily in southwestern Wisconsin lead mines or in the southeastern port towns on Lake Michigan. These Irish communities and some rural farming settlements sent representatives to the first great St. Patrick's Day parade in Milwaukee on March 17, 1843, sponsored by Milwaukee's Roman Catholic Church. The Irish of the "Bloody Third" Ward, a district in Milwaukee known for its immigrant brawls, were well represented. The *Milwaukee Sentinel* reported that delegations with banners hailed from localities such as Mineral Point, Madison, Watertown, Geneva, Kenosha, Racine, Franklin, Muskego, Waukesha, Pewaukee, and Cedarburg.<sup>6</sup> (Fitchburg was not represented because the first Irish settlers did not arrive until that June.)

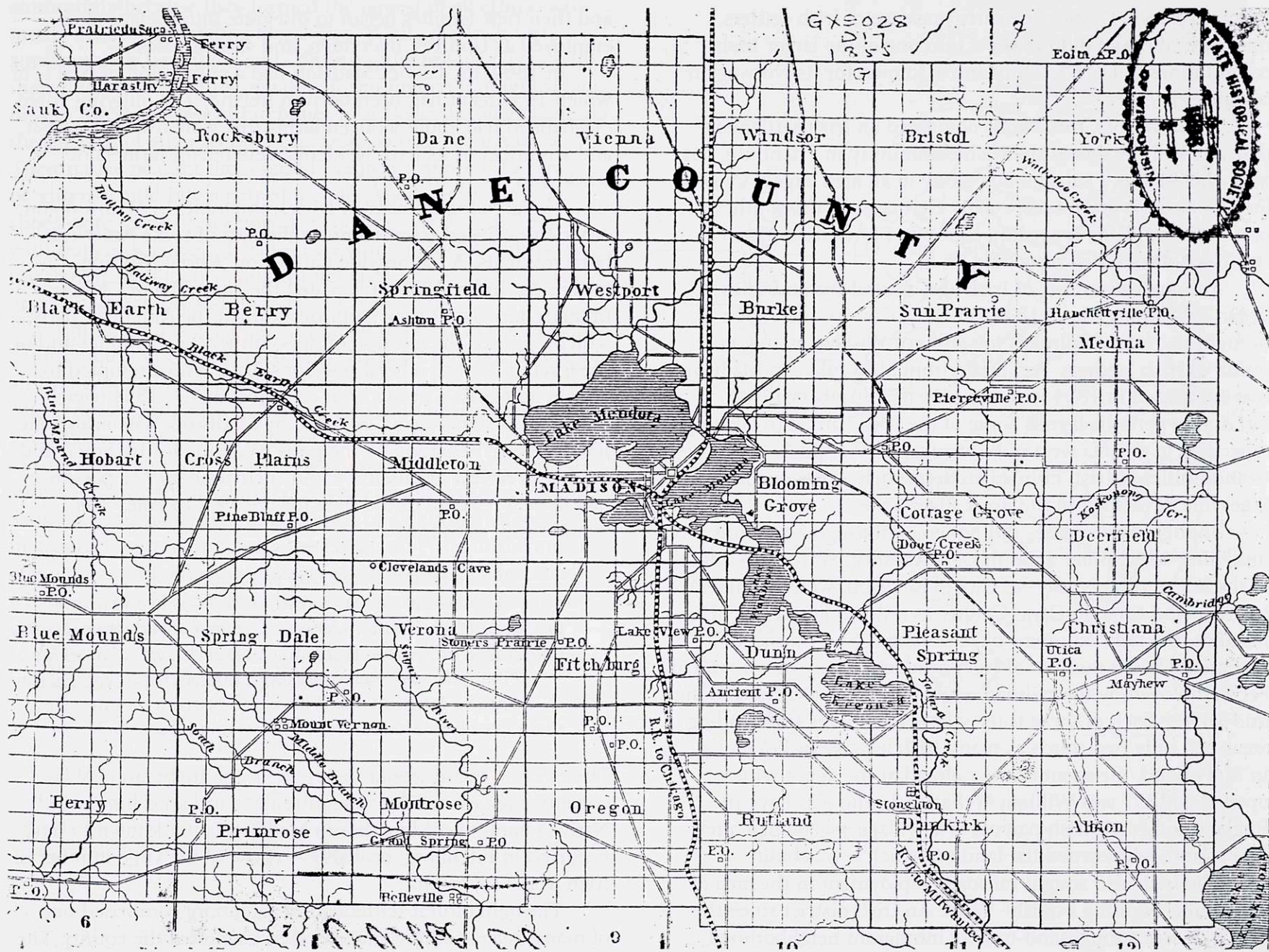
The frontier town of Milwaukee grew rapidly from 1840 to 1860, and it received a boost from the Irish Famine immigration. In 1840, Milwaukee had a population of 1,712. By 1860, the city had grown to 45,246 people, of whom 3,100 were born in Ireland. German immigrants made up a third of Milwaukee's inhabitants.<sup>7</sup> Some Irish left Milwaukee after living there for a few years and saving money to move west.

Crucial to understanding the settlement pattern of the Irish in Dane County is that the Irish came in two waves. The first occurred in the 1840's and resulted in agricultural settlements. The second occurred in the 1850's in connection with railroad construction. Fitchburg was one of Dane County's first Irish agricultural settlements, and typified a common pattern of settlement in which pre-Famine immigrants arrived and staked claims. Families fleeing the Famine soon settled around them. Eight pre-Famine Irish families formed a core in Fitchburg, settling between 1843 and 1845; nearly seventy other families joined them in the years that followed (see Appendices D and E).

The Irish held township offices such as chairman and treasurer during the pioneer days in Fitchburg, but settlers of other nationalities shared these responsibilities with the Irish, so the Irish were not considered a dominant social or political force in the township (see Appendix B). The Irish constituted a third of Fitchburg's population in 1860, and they may have totalled over half of the citizenry if they had stayed within the boundaries of the township. Instead, the Irish settlement was centered in the southeast part of Fitchburg, with additional residences located in the towns of Oregon to the south and Dunn to the east (see Map on p. 28).

The towns of Cottage Grove and Westport also became home to large rural Irish communities in Dane County.<sup>8</sup> The early formation of Westport in northern Dane County was heavily influenced by its Irish settlers, who began arriving in 1845. The township was named after the O'Malley family's home town in County Mayo, Ireland. The Irish had a stronger voice in government in the Town of Westport than they had in Fitchburg. While Westport had about the same number of Irish as Fitchburg in the early days, it had fewer non-Irish families.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the Irish had a greater impact on the development of the Westport community.

To the east of Westport lies the Town of Burke, which was named for the Irish-born politician and British reformer,



This 1855 map of Dane County shows township names, a few of the major roads, the railroad to Milwaukee, and a planned railroad to Chicago.

Edmund Burke. Despite the early presence of Irish settlers, the Town of Burke did not grow into one of the larger Irish communities of Dane County and is known for its Norwegian contingent.

The Town of Cross Plains contained an Irish settlement that was half the size of the Irish community in Fitchburg, but nevertheless was a substantial colony in an area largely known for other ethnic groups, especially Germans. In the southern part of Cross Plains township, a group of forty Irish pioneer families homesteaded near Pine Bluff.<sup>10</sup>

Although a number of Irish agricultural communities began developing in the 1840's in Dane County, the 1850's brought the rise of railroads in southern Wisconsin and an influx of Irish laborers. A railroad from Milwaukee to Madison was completed in 1854 with the help of a number of Irish, but due to periodic layoffs some of the Irish turned to farming, especially in an area west of Milwaukee in Waukesha County. Communities of Irish railroad laborers such as the one at Janesville developed in the Rock River Valley.

Though railway lines did not come through Fitchburg until after 1860, other areas in Dane County, particularly some of the larger villages and the City of Madison, were populated by Irish who came to Dane County as railroad laborers. For instance, the railroad towns of Mazomanie, Sun Prairie, and McFarland had a number of Irish residents, many of whom had been employed by the railroad when the tracks were laid in the mid-1850's. Each of these three villages and their surrounding areas had only two-thirds as many Irish as were in Fitchburg.<sup>11</sup> In McFarland, the agent of the railroad at the depot which opened in 1857 was William McFarland, who was born in England to Scotch-Irish parents. The village was named after McFarland, who owned the land on which it was built.

The Irish also sought railroad employment in the area of Madison's "Fighting Fourth" Ward. An Irish district since the 1840's, it was a rough-and-tumble immigrant neighborhood located southwest of the Capitol where railroad workers

and their new families began to integrate into society, often employed as laborers, liverymen, and seamstresses.

In 1860, the City of Madison had a population of 6,611, of which 14 percent had been born in Ireland. The outlying Town of Madison had about a dozen farms that were owned by Irish, and a number of its Irish residents were tenant farmers or worked in the nearby city.<sup>12</sup>

The growing number of Irish immigrants in Madison and other cities fueled resentment on the part of some American-born residents. A nationwide nativist or "Know Nothing" movement in the 1850's advocated the curtailing of Catholic immigration. The Know Nothings formed the American party, which opposed the election or appointment of Catholics and/or the foreign-born to official positions. Irish who attempted to vote in an election in Madison on November 7, 1854, were subjected to harassment, as noted by Madison's *Wisconsin State Journal*. Nativists stood by the polls watching for Irishmen and hoping to have a discussion about their residency (a person had to be a resident of the state for one year to vote) that would result as follows:

"Wait a minute friend. Are you a voter"?

"A voter? an' sure an' hav'nt I voted this five year in the state of New Yorrick? Away wid ye that wad deprive an honest man of his vote in this fray country!"

"But have you lived in this state six months?"

"Ah, be Jasus, an' that I have. It'll be seven months that I lived here Monday week. Do ye mind that now?"

The election board would then inform the Irishman of Wisconsin's one year residency requirement and send him away.<sup>13</sup> Nativist harassment like that in Madison is not known to have occurred in Fitchburg, probably because of the large number of Irish in the township.

The agricultural settlement of Fitchburg comprised one of many diverse ethnic enclaves that blanketed the county. The seventy-six Irish families of Fitchburg emerged as a significant

community because they formed the largest of all ethnic settlements in the surrounding townships. While the Irish were amusing their neighbors and confusing the census takers with their thick Irish brogues, a half a dozen French immigrant families to the southwest of Fitchburg near Belleville, were forming the nucleus of what would become known as Frenchtown. Their native peasant dress raised eyebrows, and for 25 cents neighbors could buy a pair of wooden shoes from them. The shoes were made of dry poplar wood and were stained black with homemade dye.<sup>14</sup> Besides Frenchtown, major European immigrant settlements around Fitchburg included the Norwegians of Stoughton and the Swiss of New Glarus.

Ethnic groups celebrated national holidays of the old country and saints' days such as St. Patrick's Day, but people of all backgrounds would rally together for the Fourth of July. The Scottish settlement in Verona township near the Sugar River became famous early in the territorial days for its Fourth of July celebration, as in 1845, when residents from Fitchburg and neighboring townships converged on the western Verona Scottish settlement. Men and women of all ancestries found themselves learning to dance the Highland Fling to the music of bagpipes and enjoying the cheer of home-distilled Scotch whiskey.<sup>15</sup> The Irish of Fitchburg and immigrants throughout Dane County were learning to be Americans by integrating some of their native traditions with those of the cultures that swirled around their emerging settlements.



Counties of Ireland