



Addie Fox Kiser with horses in front of Fox Hall in 1897. The Italianate house was built in 1856 by George and Catherine Fox from sandstone that was quarried locally and lumber that was transported across Lake Michigan. While the house was being built, the family lived in the basement which had a kitchen and a dining room.

Fox Settlement

The first of the three core Irish communities to be established in Fitchburg was the Fox Settlement. The Fox and Keenan families arrived in the southeastern part of Fitchburg in June, 1843, well before the Famine emigration from Ireland. The Fox Settlement was important to the development of Fitchburg and southern Dane County because it was home to the first doctor in the region, and it provided a number of early political leaders.

The Fox Settlement centered around the Fox farms on County M, located south of the hilly Milton Moraine on the gently rolling land that the Fox brothers had viewed the previous November. Irish families that set up farms nearby included the Keenans, who lived on the southern end of Caine Road, and other Irish homesteaders who lived on County MM in Fitchburg. The McGlynnns and the McWilliams were two of the first families to join the Foxes and Keenans at this settlement. Soon to follow were those escaping the Famine. On the 1860 census, some of the other area families listed were the Byrnes, Flemings, Giellands, Kellys, Lallys, and Pierces.⁹² (See Appendix G.) Together, the families of the Fox Settlement developed a vibrant agricultural community.

Log cabins and barns were constructed, initially, and in time a public grade school, Prairie View, and a Catholic church, St. Mary's, were erected. Stores and hotels were not built, since the stagecoach routes, only two miles away, were the sites of villages—Oak Hall to the west, Lake View to the northeast, and Oregon to the southeast.

The founders of the Fox Settlement, the Foxes and Keenans, were from well-to-do families in Ireland. Eleanor Loftus Lynn Fox, the matriarch of the Fox family, was said to have been born in a castle in Ireland and to have died in a log cabin in Fitchburg. A family story relates that the Foxes left their Waterford home in 1832 when a member of the family

shot and killed an English officer who was confiscating a horse from the estate stables.⁹³

The Keenan family, which consisted of five siblings in their twenties, emigrated from County Offaly in May, 1837, a few years after the death of their mother. Their father remained in Ireland. Another brother, Thomas, stayed in Ireland and was a barrister in Dublin. He wrote in 1843 to his sister Fanny in Fitchburg, "I often wished I was in some foreign country. . . . Make inquiry if the attorney business is good in America. Not that I have a notion of going but I would like to know. It is not as good here now as it was but indeed I can't complain as I am able to make £500 a year at it." Thomas Keenan did not move to the United States, but this letter gives one a sense that those who stayed behind were also weighing the option to emigrate.⁹⁴

When the Irish arrived by covered wagon to the Fox Settlement, they faced many challenges. An early legend unfolded in 1844 about a Fitchburg heroine, Matilda Keenan. Matilda was returning from her brother George Fox's cabin carrying an infant in her arms when she met a full-grown bear. She fended off the bear by throwing her baby's bonnet and cloak to him and running home. Besides bear, an occasional panther was seen in the vicinity of Fitchburg.⁹⁵

Despite the dangers of the wilderness, the Fox Settlement pioneers worked together to solve problems and better their lives. The adults of the community often had additional professions besides farming. Among these pioneers were a doctor, two preachers, and a grain-reaper salesman, all of whom spent time working both in Fitchburg and in other communities throughout south-central Wisconsin.⁹⁶

Dr. William H. Fox was the first physician in the region south of Madison. He was said to have ridden through rainstorms until his boots were filled with water, as he went to see patients deep in the country. The son of Dr. William Fox wrote



Foxmount, located in the countryside east of Waterford, Ireland, was home to the William and Eleanor Fox family, who immigrated to the United States in 1832. Their son, George Fox, used Foxmount's floor plan in building Fox Hall in Fitchburg. Photo taken in 1975.

that his father treated not only settlers in Fitchburg, but also local Winnebago Indians who suffered from fever.

The chief sickness among the Indians was fever and ague, probably due to the climatic conditions and exposures under which the Indians lived. . . . Indians, numbering sometimes a couple of dozen or more, [sat] around under the trees in our dooryard at the old farm, while my father, with an assistant (usually one of his own daughters), administered to these sick Indians in the following manner; He would have a common dish-pan with a lot of powder in it, presumably mostly quinine. He would walk with this from one Indian to another, using a large tablespoon with which to put a dose of this powder in the

Indians' mouths, then his assistant, walking behind, would have a pan full of little chunks of raw salt pork, and with a fork would place one chunk in the mouth of each Indian for him to chew, and with which to work the powder down. . . . [A]s far as I can remember, I did not see a single Indian spit the powder out. . . .

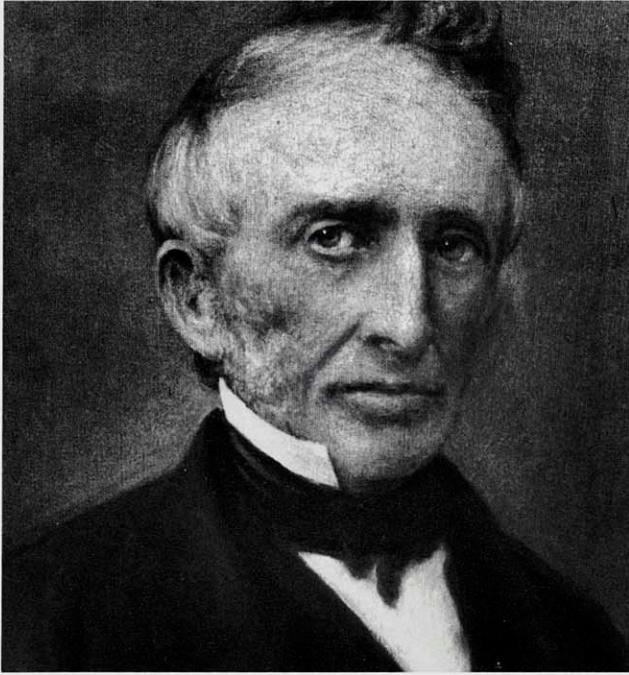
In exchange for his services, the Indians would leave Dr. Fox, whom they called a "medicine man," tanned hides of deerskin and bearskin.⁹⁷

Dr. Fox was involved in Fitchburg government and became the first township treasurer in 1847. Also in that year he was a member of the Wisconsin state constitutional convention, serving on a committee that tackled a vast array of topics, including preamble, boundaries, franchise, internal improvements, taxation and finance, militia, and bill of rights.⁹⁸

Another person with a number of responsibilities was John Keenan. In addition to raising a wheat cash crop and hauling it by ox team to market in Milwaukee and to lumber camps farther north, he was active in local government and was chairman of the Fitchburg Town Board from 1851 to 1857. John Keenan also served a number of terms on the County Board of Supervisors in the 1850's. In 1859, his wife Flora worked the farm while John served a term in the state legislature, where he was a member of the Assembly standing committee for state lands.⁹⁹

Community events such as weddings were a focal point of Fox Settlement life. In January, 1850, John Keenan married Flora McKee. The bride's mother wrote to her sister Margaret who lived in County Down, Ireland, "Flora . . . was married on the sixteenth of the month. They were married before supper. Tea and supper are all one here. We had all things decent. They stayed with us all night and went home to their house the next day."¹⁰⁰ Evidently, the demise of the afternoon tea tradition was noteworthy to the Irish immigrants.

John Keenan's brother, George, raised extra cash by working as a shoemaker in Madison, which entailed traveling by horseback one hour each way. Another pioneer, John

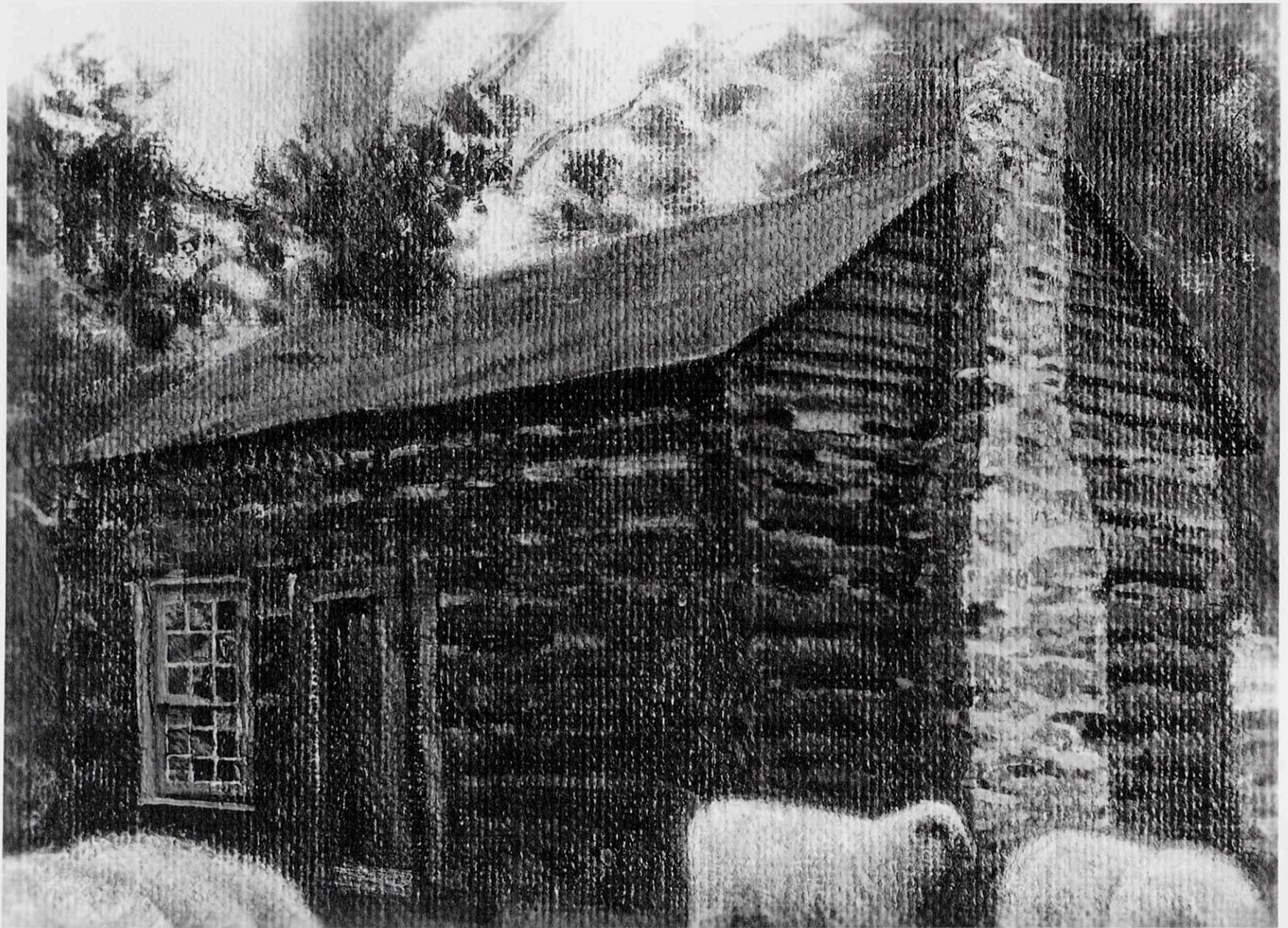


In 1843, William and Eleanor Fox were on the first wagon train of Irish to reach Fitchburg. The couple resided with their son George at the Fox Settlement.

McWilliams, arrived after the Foxes and Keenans and worked for five years on area farms doing such labor as splitting rails for fences while he set up his own farm. He started an apple orchard in 1846 on his homestead southwest of the intersection of County MM and Schneider Road, and it became one of the best orchards in the area. McWilliams was the first constable and the first tax collector for Fitchburg in 1847.¹⁰¹

The Irish settlement area spread north from McWilliams' farm along County MM. The farm to the northwest of the intersection with Schneider Road was owned by the Irish Gielland family. The property was later bought by Patrick Sheil who had been born in Ireland after the Famine, and left County Wicklow for America in 1881. Patrick and Rosanna Sheil moved onto the farm in the mid-1880's.¹⁰²

Farther north and a half-mile to the west on Byrne Road was the Kivlin farm, which was purchased in 1862 from a Byrne family. Michael Kivlin and Anna Killerlain were married in 1854 in their native County Sligo, Ireland, where Michael was a farmer and fisherman. They immigrated to America that same year and Michael worked at slate and marble quarries while the young family resided in Rutland, Vermont. The Kivlins moved to Fitchburg, where they began farming. Later in the century, their son John bought a farm in nearby Rutland and purchased sheep from A. O. Fox's Woodside Stock Farm. John imported Shropshire, Dorset, and Cheviot sheep from England, and he bred Shorthorn cattle, Poland China and Chester White hogs, and Belgian horses.¹⁰³ Other leading stock farms in the area in the late 1800's included John



Dr. William and Cornelia Fox built this log cabin in 1843 where the Oregon State Farm is now located. The painting was made after the cabin was abandoned.

McWilliams' Oakwood Stock Farm and R. J. McWatty's Lake View Stock Farm.

Additional Irish farms were established north of the Fox Settlement on County MM. Matthew Fox, brother of George and Dr. William Fox, started a farm in 1845 a half-mile north of the Lake View village. The farm north of Matthew Fox's belonged to the Irish Cathcart family, who sold their place in 1868 to Edward and Ellen Glennan. The Glennans are an example of a family that first lived in a large East Coast city before buying a frontier farm. During the Famine, the Glennan family left County Roscommon and moved to Philadelphia. They traveled west in 1858 and lived in the Dane County towns of Blooming Grove and Westport before settling in Fitchburg. Their Irish-American hired man, Frank White, married their daughter, Bridget, and assumed management of the farm.¹⁰⁴

In the years 1843 to 1860, the Irish families of the Fox Settlement established a large number of households on the woodlands south of the Milton Moraine and along County MM. The settlement was founded primarily by well-to-do Irish and was expanded by Famine-era immigrants, forming a diverse but interdependent community. The Fox Settlement became known for welcoming Irish immigrants and offering employment on the established farms until newcomers could buy their own places. Two of the Fox Settlement's greatest contributions to the Fitchburg community were the first doctor south of Madison, and political leaders on the town, county, and state levels. The economic and political life of Fitchburg and the surrounding region was greatly enhanced by the efforts of the Fox Settlement pioneers.



In 1851, John Keenan was the first Irish person to be elected town board chairman. John and Flora Keenan lived on a Caine Road farm that had a stone quarry from which the limestone foundation blocks were gathered for most cabins and barns in southeast Fitchburg.

