In the summer of 1839, 23-year-old John Evenson Molee of Stavanger, Norway boarded a sailship loaded with Swedish iron bound for Boston. Like a handful of Norwegians before him and several hundred thousand after him, he was looking for opportunity. A second son of a struggling farm family, a citizen of a country whose declining economy could not easily support its burgeoning population, John Molee traded a promise of two years labor in America for his $47 passage across the Atlantic and on to Milwaukee. “It did not take me longer to make up my mind than it requires to say ‘Ja’” (Rasmus Anderson, p. 308).

John Lurass, too, boarded that sailship bound for Boston. Unlike John Molee, Luraas was the first son of a farmer and stood to inherit the family land, considered to be among the best of the community. Yet he also was concerned for his future. “It was obvious that I would assure myself a hopeless future by taking charge of the farm with its heavy indebtedness, buying out my brothers and sisters in such a fashion that they suffered no injustice, and finally providing a pension for my father” (2 Clausen, p. 11). In between chores and late into the night, John Luraas read eagerly in Ole Rynning’s book, A True Account of America. John Luraas decided he would go to find his future there.

Others, too, were reading the books, drinking in the letters, looking around and searching their hearts. Along with John Molee and John Luraas on that American sailship to Boston in the summer of 1839 were others from Stavanger and from Tinn and Hjartdal in Telemark who would settle in Muskego. Between 1825 and 1850, 18,000 Norwegians would emigrate to America.

Many of those who left Norway were farmers. As beautiful as the land was, it was mountainous and rocky. Pulling a living from the land was difficult in the best of times; and in the first half of the 19th century in Norway it was not the best of times. Not only was farming challenging in many parts of Norway, there was also tremendous stress on the land. In the century preceding emigration, population exploded. Norway’s population doubled between 1801 and 1845. Even with the emigration of 500,000 people, population had tripled by 1905. What is more, 80% of Norway’s population was rural, dependent on only 4% of arable land.

Also contributing to the push of emigration was a rampant class consciousness. The Norwegian aristocracy of urban officials included clergy, who as part of the Lutheran state Church of Norway were paid through
taxation. Of 1,328,471 people in 1843, only 77,780 were independent landholders, or bønder. The vast majority of folks were husmenn—cotters, tenants, laborers or servants on the land. Though conditions for servants varied, John Molee wrote that a servant could not even sit at table with the landowner.

The Haugean movement in Norway also had a significant impact on emigration. Hans Nielsen Hauge was an itinerant lay preacher who had much influence in the early 1800s. Hauge encouraged a warm, personal faith, while the Church stressed the acceptance of pure doctrine. For the first time in Norwegian Lutheranism, lay people became active leaders in the church. They were encouraged to obey their conscience and rely less on the authority of clergy. The itinerant Haugean preachers and book peddlers helped bring about new forms of social contact, breaking up the geographic isolation of the many small communities. Haugeanism prepared the ground psychologically, too, “helping to detach ordinary people from the old society, enabling them to receive new signals and make radical decisions such as leaving for America” (Semmingsen, p. 35).

With the coming of the “America letters,” which made their way back to Norway from early emigrants, “America fever” hit hard, and though many nationalists lamented it, the common people of Norway succumbed to the bug. National heroes like the poet Henrik Wergeland likened the empty farmhouses due to emigration to the Black Plague. He considered it a tragedy that so many would leave. In 1837 Bishop Neumann of Bergen warned the “emigration-smitten” farmers of his diocese that forsaking the motherland for America would bring frightful consequences.

*Here in Norway rest the ashes of your fathers, here you first saw the light of day, here you enjoyed many childhood pleasures, here you received your first impressions of God and of His love, here you are still surrounded by relatives and friends who share your joy and your sorrow; while there, when you are far away from all that has been dear to you, who shall close your eyes in the last hour of life? A stranger’s hand! And who shall weep at your grave? Perhaps—no one!”* (Malmín, p. 108-109).

Pastor H. G. Stub wrote about the leavetaking in Bergen in 1848 between Hans A. and Ingeborg Stub and their parents. “They were almost inconsolable at the thought of parting with us. To them it was almost like following the children to the grave” (Stub, p. 9). Still the Norwegians emigrated, by the hundreds and then by the thousands and then by the tens of thousands.
Wisconsin Territory was opening up for settlement just when conditions were right for Norwegians to emigrate. The climate and topography suited the Norwegians well; it reminded them of their homeland with its woods and lakes. Wisconsin became a destination point for the Norwegian emigrants. John Molee, John Lurass and their traveling companions were four months on the journey to Milwaukee. An 1868 magazine article recounts a part of the legend of the settlement at Muskego. It seems that most in the group had intended to go to Illinois. Then a delegation from Milwaukee came aboard. Our self-appointed advisers showed us two men. One of them was a large, heavy-set man of good appearance; the other one of them was a living skeleton with every sign of sickness and degeneracy. "That fat man is from Wisconsin where there is a healthful climate and abundant food; the skinny one is from Illinois where people dry up in the hot sun and die like flies from swamp-fever. Well, friends, choose as you think best" (2 Clausen, p. 14).

The men were persuasive and the emigrants chose Muskego, but they were disappointed when the rains came and much of the land was soon under water. Some moved on, others stayed and worked at clearing and building.

Luraas was one who stayed. He and the others bought land in Racine and Milwaukee (now Waukesha) counties, thus founding the Norwegian settlement of Muskego. Also entering land on September 16, 1839, were Torger Ostenson, Osten Olsen, Knud Johnson, Ole Halvorson, Halvor Ostenson, John Halvorson and Andreas Ambrosius. In 1842 John Molee also came to Muskego and worked for Americans in order to earn money to buy a piece of land, which he did, just west of "Reymert’s Lake" (now called Lake Denoon).

In those early years, land was cheap and plentiful. In the 1830s the U.S. government had persuaded the Potawatomis Indians to cede five million acres of their lands in southeastern Wisconsin and northeastern Illinois in exchange for a similar amount of land in western Iowa. Some Potawatomis continued to

Ole and Kari Hogenson, early settlers and founders of the church
live at least part of the time in Racine County. (As late as 1853, Potawatomi continued to make use of a campsite on Muskego Creek. They also continued to hold festivals on their sacred grounds—Indian Hill. They paid Peter Jacobson in muskrat skins for damage done by their ponies while there.)

But most of the Wisconsin Potawatomi were brought to Milwaukee in June, 1838 for a mass exodus. By the late 1830s there were already a number of white settlers in various parts of Racine County. Most of these were New Englanders by background, who moved west due to population pressures. The area was surveyed in 1835. The Territory of Wisconsin established Racine County in an act approved on December 7, 1836, though land was held off the market until 1839. When sales at the Milwaukee land office finally opened, land sold at the government rate of $1.25 per acre.

The completion of the Erie Canal in 1825 was a vital link in the migration to Wisconsin. Both foreigners and Americans traveled inland up the Hudson to Albany, via canalboat to Buffalo, and by steamship through the Great Lakes to Milwaukee. Its proximity to Milwaukee made Muskego a natural stopping-off place for Norwegian immigrants. The Norwegians who populated Wisconsin often first made contact with countrymen in Muskego and rested a while or tried to earn some money before heading for the interior. Many, however, stayed and the settlement extended southward.

Among those who came and stayed in Muskego were Søren Bache and Johannes Johansen, both of whom would play prominent roles in establishing the Norwegian community. Originally intending to settle in the Fox River settlement, about 70 miles southwest of Chicago, they were discouraged by the sickness and death that they found there. (The dead included Ole Rynnig whose book influenced so many to leave Norway.) Instead, Bache and Johansen went north, finding plentiful land at government prices at Wind Lake. They bought enough so they could guarantee their countrymen a fair price in the same neighborhood. The two excavated an Indian mound and made it into a dwelling. They also opened a general store, carting goods from Milwaukee to sell to the settlers.

Late in the summer of 1840, the families of Syvert Ingebretsen, Ole Anderson, Johannes Skofstad, Ole Trovatten, Even Hansen Heg, John Larson, Knud Aslakson, Hans Jacobson and Ole Anderson came and settled in the area. Heg bought the Luraas farm near Wind Lake. Luraas had decided to move west to settle the area in Dane County known as Koskong.

Ole Hogenson came with his growing family. He and his wife Kari had become proud new parents a couple days after arriving in Milwaukee. All Ole had to his name was a single ten-cent piece. But he made many articles of woodenware which he sold and traded to the settlers and in a short amount of time he was able to build a cabin in the north part of the township. The couple had eight children together.

In 1842 Hermund Nelson Tufte, his wife Kari, and their three daughters

Others came from Illinois settlements. Mons Aadland, his wife, and five children, had sailed from Bergen in 1837 with Ole Rynning and settled in Beaver Creek. After malaria killed many people there, he and his family left in 1840, settling at North Cape. John Dale, too, settled in Illinois in 1837 before moving to Muskego in 1842. Ole Overson and family, from Hviteseid, lived with the Dales, until in 1845 Ole was able to buy his own land in the southeastern part of the township. Gunder Gauteson Midbø, a schoolteacher in the parish of Tinn, settled at Fox River in 1837. He became a day laborer until he saved enough to buy land in the town of Norway in 1842. By 1844 it was estimated that the Muskego settlement numbered 600 souls (2 Nelson, p. 65).

The settlement continued to grow through the 1840s. Settlers during that time included Captain Hans Friis of the Enigheden, who made nine trips with emigrants between 1837-47. Then he himself emigrated, farmed in the town of Norway, and sailed the Great Lakes. Jens and Anne Hatlestad came in 1846, along with their children, including Ole who became a pastor. Hans and Marthe Lovbraaten and Hans and Mari Skari came from Hadeland in 1849 and settled in North Cape. The Lovbraatens continued on to Washington Prairie, Iowa in 1852, while the Skari family stayed. James and Caspara Reyment lived next to Silver Lake, which Reyment renamed Lake Denoon after his Scottish mother. He aspired to create his own thriving little community there, building a post office, saw mill, and the print shop which housed the press for Nordlyset, or "The Northern Light," a short-lived Norwegian newspaper produced by Reyment, Bache and Heg. 276 subscribers paid $2 a year for the paper. The first issue contained a translation of the Declaration of Independence.

So the settlement known as Muskego came to be populated. Although Muskego was the northernmost point of the settlement centered around Wind Lake, the name stuck. By the end of the 1840s, with the coming of additional Norwegians, other Europeans, and some Americans, most of the land in the township had been sold. Wisconsin Territory established the Town of Norway on February 11, 1847. The large central portion of the Town of Norway consisted of a great peat marsh, with Wind Lake on its northwestern edge. The census of 1850 for the Town of Norway shows 146 families, 406
A section of the Town of Norway plat map from 1858. The central portion of the town consisted of wetlands. Indian Hill is in the south central part of Section 17.

white males and 339 white females, the majority Norwegian; as well as three colored males and 3 colored females. There were 134 dwellings in the township. By 1860 the inhabitants numbered 961.

After building temporary shelter and getting their feet on the ground, the settlers’ next priority was arranging for both a church and the religious education of their children. Other settlements were thinking along similar lines. In a letter dated November 6, 1839, Ansten Nattestat at Jefferson Prairie wrote to Peter Valeur in Norway informing him that, although they would have liked to call him as their pastor, unfortunately the community did not yet have the resources to call a Lutheran minister. Unlike Jefferson Priairie, however, Muskego had the great fortune of having Søren Bache as a community leader, and by extension his father, the Norwegian Haugean
Tollef Bache, as a benefactor. When the senior Bache was asked to help Muskego find a pastor, or at the very least a teacher for their children, Tollef talked to a young Danish schoolteacher, Claus Clausen. The news of Clausen’s coming was a welcome answer to the prayers of those Muskego settlers who regularly gathered to worship in Even Heg’s barn.