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Wisconsin's Disaggregated Development and the Study of the Midwest

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The state of Wisconsin, which emerged haphazardly out of the old Northwest Territory, did not develop in an integrated fashion. In the beginning it encompassed undefined Indian Country centered between Lake Michigan and the Mississippi River and beyond. Wisconsin was then part of Michigan Territory, remaining so from 1805 until 1836. By the time of significant white settlement after the Blackhawk War of 1832 and the extinguishing of American Indian claims, the emergence of other states began to limit Wisconsin's potential size. Illinois received the land that included Chicago. Michigan kept the timber and mineral rich Upper Peninsula. That two sessions of the Wisconsin Territorial Legislature met in Burlington did not keep Iowa, at one time part of Wisconsin, from becoming a separate state. Likewise, Minnesota broke away from Wisconsin. A final blow to Wisconsin's development came about the time of statehood in 1848 when the state's lead mining sector collapsed.² The largest place in Gilded Age Wisconsin was

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² Alice Smith, *The History of Wisconsin, Vol. I: From Exploration to Statehood* (Madison, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1973).

Milwaukee,³ a commercial and manufacturing port on Lake Michigan with a population in 1880 of 115,587, separated from the rest of the state by large marshes that started a little west of town. Milwaukee interests, strongly tied to Chicago capitalists, eventually built roads and railroads into the Wisconsin interior, not to unify the state, but to connect with Chicago, eighty-five miles to the south, and Minneapolis-St. Paul, three hundred miles to the northwest.⁴

By the Gilded Age census of 1880, Wisconsin, with 1,315,497 people, was a series of loosely connected regions. A notable action of early state legislatures was to pass laws giving special powers to Milwaukee, making the city a virtually independent city state, further separating it from the rest of Wisconsin. Wisconsin, where upwards of 40% of the people were recent immigrants, had an economy increasingly based on lumbering and on an agricultural sector shifting from growing wheat to dairying. Six regional cities of between 10,000 and 20,000 population constituted the principal components of Wisconsin urbanization outside Milwaukee. For better or worse, each had more influence in their own regions than Milwaukee.⁵ Understanding Wisconsin's decentralized and greatly localized early development offers important clues for historians of later eras who are attempting to come to terms with the history of the Midwest as a region.

³ Robert Luce, "Milwaukee," *Social Statistics of Cities*, vol. 19, pt. 2, *Tenth Census of the United States* (Washington: G.P.O., 1887), 660-65. See Bayrd Still, *Milwaukee: A History of a City* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1948). Until the twentieth century any city with more than 10,000 people was considered an important city. In 1880, the United States had 227 cities that had crossed the 10,000 line.

⁴ Richard N. Current, *A History of Wisconsin, Vol. II: The Civil War Era, 1848-1873* (Madison, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1976).

⁵ Robert C. Nesbit, *A History of Wisconsin, Vol. III: Urbanization Industrialization* (Madison, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1985). This study has a comprehensive bibliography.



Figure 1. Map by the U.S. General Land Office, 1896. From the American Geographical Society Library, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee Libraries.

During the settlement era, only one of Wisconsin's regions contained more than one of the six regional cities. It was the Fox River Valley, above Milwaukee, in eastern Wisconsin.⁶ The Fox River Valley was also the only part of the state in which a number of aspiring communities competed against each other for local dominance. They included Fond du Lac, Oshkosh, Neenah-Menasha, Appleton, and Green Bay. In the 1830s and 1840s, rather orderly settlement had occurred in the then remote Fox River Valley, reached from the outside from Lake

⁶ See Charles N. Glaab and Lawrence H. Larsen, *Factories in the Valley: Neenah-Menasha, 1870-1915* (Madison, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1969).

Michigan through Green Bay and by roads from southern Wisconsin that were little better than trails. Easy access to grain and lumber provided the basis for sound progress, led by flour milling in Neenah-Menasha and woodenware manufacturing in Oshkosh.

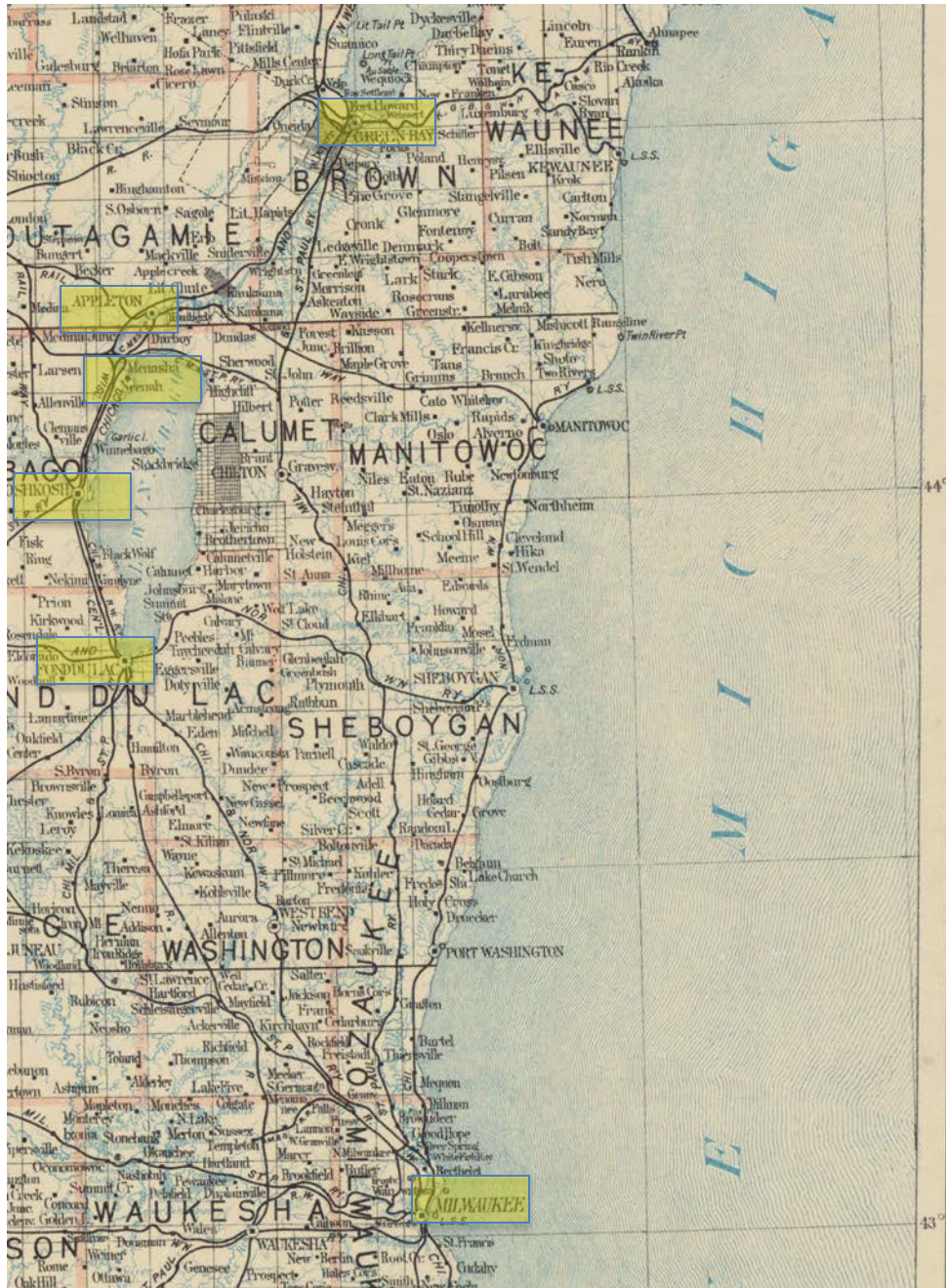


Figure 2. Inset of map by U.S. General Land Office, 1896, with relevant locations highlighted. From the American Geographical Society Library, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee Libraries.

Change followed the end of the Civil War. Competition between the leading Fox River Valley towns became more heated and aggressive. Appleton and Green Bay grew slower than expected. A series of large fires ravaged the Oshkosh industrial district. With a shift westward of grain production, Neenah-Menasha industrialists, in what proved a brilliant and very rewarding financial move, took a calculated risk in closing their flour mills and converting to papermaking. Within a decade, the Fox River Valley became the leading American papermaking center west of the Appalachian Mountains. A limited recovery of woodenware production in Oshkosh and new manufacturing in Fond du Lac solidified the Fox River Valley as a noteworthy industrial complex. Fond du Lac advanced from 5,466 people in 1860 to 13,094 people in 1880.⁷ Oshkosh expanded from 6,086 inhabitants to 15,746 in the same time span.⁸ Yet, before any other city with more than 10,000 people rose from the urban competition in the Fox River Valley, the building of railroads cemented relationships with Milwaukee and Chicago, but not with the rest of Wisconsin.

In southeastern Wisconsin, Racine, twenty-five miles south of Milwaukee and sixty miles north of Chicago, located at a natural Lake Michigan harbor at the mouth of the unnavigable Root River, never seriously competed for urban supremacy in Wisconsin. Racine was a 1834 speculative venture of a U.S. Navy captain attracted by the potential of the harbor. Racine grew very slowly over the next several years. Sandbars blocked the harbor and marshy land impeded access to the interior until dredging opened the harbor and plank roads cut through the marshes. Racine then became a significant grain shipping port and a railroad built a trunk line through Racine that linked Chicago and Milwaukee. The building of farm machinery works in Racine signaled the beginning of what became a strong industrial base. Racine grew steadily to 7,822 inhabitants in 1860 and on to 16,037 in 1880, making the city the second largest in Wisconsin. City officials worried, however, that Chicago and Milwaukee might become more attractive to hinterland farmers due to their greater offerings of goods, capital, and markets.⁹

⁷ "Fond du Lac," *Social Statistics of Cities*, 645-46; *The History of Fond du Lac, County* (Chicago: Western Historical Company, 1880). While old county histories contain considerable data on urban hinterlands, there is nothing on urban Wisconsin hinterlands comparable to the hinterland history of Chicago: William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York, W.W. Norton, 1991).

⁸ "Oshkosh," 679-81; Richard J. Harney, *History of Winnebago County, Wisconsin* (Oshkosh, Allen and Hicks, 1880).

⁹ "Committee of City Authorities," "Racine," *Social Statistics of Cities*, 682-83. The most recent history of Racine is Nicholas C. Burekel, *Racine: Growth and Change in a Wisconsin County* (Racine, Racine County Board of Supervisors, 1977).

Madison, located between three lakes, dominated the south-central Four Lakes district, almost by default because of a lack of viable rivals. Madison was not only the state capital, but the site of the University of Wisconsin. With the coming of railroads, the population grew from 1,525 in 1850 to 5,614 in 1860, in what, while only seventy miles west of Milwaukee, was a rather remote part of Wisconsin, with no river lines or decent roads. During the Civil War, Camp Randall, on the edge of Madison, was a mustering ground for Wisconsin military units. By 1880, Madison was a city of 10,324 people. New railroads connected Madison with Chicago.¹⁰

La Crosse rose on a stretch of the Mississippi River Valley lined with hamlets and villages. La Crosse lay on alluvial soil in rich agricultural country at the confluence of the Mississippi River and the Black River, which flowed down out of the Wisconsin pineries. In 1860, La Crosse was a village of 3,860. A transforming moment came with the start of what became a great flow of lumber down the Black River to La Crosse for sawing and shipping. The river harbor thrived; railroads linked La Crosse, Minneapolis-St. Paul, Milwaukee and Chicago. The size of La Crosse grew from a population of 7,785 in 1870 to 14,505 in 1880. Lumbering made La Crosse a bustling industrial city, with closer ties to upstream Minneapolis-St. Paul and Chicago than Milwaukee.¹¹

Eau Claire, deep in the North Woods, eighty miles east of Minneapolis-St. Paul and 180-miles northwest of Milwaukee, was a camp of 626 transient lumberjacks in 1860. Two lumber streams, the Eau Claire River and the Chippewa River, merged at Eau Claire. Railroads provided communications to Lake Superior and via connecting lines to Chicago. Large lumber companies established their headquarters in Eau Claire. Transshipping lumber cut at several local sawmills swelled the Eau Claire population from 2,298 in 1870 to 10,119 in 1880. "Lumber Barons," a name applied to individuals made wealthy by the lumber business, provided a distinct architecture by constructing Victorian-style ornate wooden mansions in Eau Claire, giving the impression that the place had a firm foundation.¹²

¹⁰ B.J. Stevens, "Madison," *Social Statistics of Cities*, 654-56; David Mollenhoff, *Madison: A History of the Formative Years* (Dubuque, Kendall/Hunt Pub. Co. 1982).

¹¹ "La Crosse," *Social Statistics of Cities*, 650; Eric J. Morser, *Hinterland Dreams: The Political Economy of a Midwestern City* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); H.J. Hirschheimer, *A History of La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1841-1900* (La Crosse, La Crosse County Historical Society, 1951).

¹² "Eau Claire," *Social Statistics of Cities*, 644. See Robert Freis, *Empire in Pine: The Story of Lumbering in Wisconsin, 1830-1900* (Madison, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1951).

As the twentieth century progressed, new statewide developments further unified Wisconsinites: the Progressive movement led by Robert M. La Follett; the “Wisconsin idea” and the state university system; the consequences of cutting down the North Woods; the devastating impact of the Great Depression on manufacturing and the dramatic turn-around in World War II; the rise and fall of Joseph R. McCarthy; the statewide embrace of Vincent Lombardi and his Green Bay Packers; the continuing role of the Catholic Church; the impact of tourism and recreation on the economy; all of these helped to consolidate Wisconsin’s disparate geographic regions. While shadows of the old nineteenth century divisions remain today, they are increasingly difficult to find. A few historical markers along highways and seldom read historical accounts are the most visible reminders of Wisconsin’s disaggregated past.

The very developments that unified the state also integrated Wisconsin into the Midwest. The early Midwest took shape with the building of a transportation system that moved agricultural produce, natural resources, and manufactured items mainly through a primary economic “hub” at Chicago and such connecting subhubs as St. Louis, Minneapolis-St. Paul, and Milwaukee. The railroads of Wisconsin, while originally built for other reasons, proved an ideal way to transport dairy products via nocturnal “milk trains” from way stations throughout the state to the Chicago market.¹⁵ The Wisconsin dairy industry, presently larger and more prosperous than the highly publicized Florida citrus industry, has through the years been the most obvious way that Wisconsin connects to the Midwest as a whole.

This later economic integration, however, should not blind us to the realities of early development in Wisconsin, which was a much more complicated process. In that sense, the Fox River Valley might offer another lesson for the development of Midwestern states. As journalist and Iowa native Richard Longworth has argued, the state borders that we recognize today both contain a myriad of internal regions and cut through others that cross state lines.¹⁶ The Fox River Valley is but one example of the divisions – economic and otherwise – that make the Midwestern states a patchwork of regions centered on places that might have little bearing to

¹⁴ Eric Lampard, *The Rise of the Dairy Industry in Wisconsin: A Study in Agricultural Change, 1820-1920* (Madison, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1963). There is no general study of the rise of manufacturing in late nineteenth century Wisconsin.

¹⁵ Axel Lorenzsonn, *Steam and Cinders: The Advent of Railroads in Wisconsin* (Madison, Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2009).

¹⁶ Richard C. Longworth, *Caught in the Middle: America’s Heartland in the Age of Globalism* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2008), especially Chapter 13 “The Blue and the Red.”

other locations within even their own state. This is both a challenge and an opportunity for historians of the Midwest, typically accustomed to state-based histories, to consider both the global and the intensely local in their work.