

Historical Background — Wisconsin Population Distribution

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The westward movement of settlers from the Atlantic seaboard into the virgin lands beyond the Appalachian Mountains is epochal in American history. The pioneers of early American stock were joined by foreign immigrants and these two groups pushed westward into the new land.

The French Regime: 1634-1763

The first white man to set foot upon the territory which was later to be included within the boundaries elected to limit the Wisconsin Territory was Jean Nicolet. His journey illustrates how the lakes and tributaries from the early exploratory days directed people toward Wisconsin.

There were manifold motives that directed the pioneer into the midwest. To some the impelling motive was a search for a passage across the North American continent to the Pacific. To others exploration was secondary to the diplomatic services they might render in securing furs. Still others hoped to find gold and silver mines and to duplicate the wealth of the Spanish.

The traffic in furs was of such importance that the profitable returns stimulated the traders to penetrate farther into the interior of the country. The traffic in furs led to an exploitation of the Indians which was in some ways detrimental to them; but the traders rendered a valuable diplomatic service in preparing a way for the people who were to come later. They constituted the vanguard of the miners and agriculturalists who were to follow.

British Period

With the fall of Quebec to the British in 1760 French sovereignty in Wisconsin was virtually ended, but the change to British control altered only slightly the fur industry. The British set up trading posts and invited the Indians to bring furs in exchange for rifles and trinkets. Under this plan another step toward the permanent occupation of the land had been taken.

After 1763 there began a steady stream of frontiersmen who cut away the forest and established permanent settlements as soon as, and even before, the land was acquired from the aborigines.

American Period

The treaty of Paris of 1783 which transferred control of Wisconsin from British control to American control was merely a scrap of paper as far as reality was concerned. During the period which elapsed between 1783 and 1816, British and American interests were often at odds in this territory, but following the War of 1812 Wisconsin became under effective American control.

The first settlements: By 1820 the white population of Wisconsin had begun to localize in one or two places. This fact made possible an estimate of the actual number of permanent settlers. In 1820 Green Bay and Prairie du Chien were the only important settlements in Wisconsin. The former consisted of about 60 houses and population of perhaps 500 besides the garrison of soldiers. Prairie du Chien, the other settlement, had approximately 600 settlers including 100 soldiers.

Sectional Settlement of Wisconsin: 1820-1900

The early settlement of Wisconsin can best be discussed by dividing the state into five divisions: The Lead Region, the Eastern Ridge region, the Central Plain, the West Upland and the Northern Region. These divisions are based partly on physiographical features and partly on the historical development of settlement.

The Lead Region: Unified by the presence of mineral resource, the region of the Upper Mississippi River Valley known as the Lead Region has had a special history. That part of Wisconsin included within the borders of the Lead Region has shared in this history.

A few miners reached Wisconsin in 1820, but it was not until 1825 that the frenzied movement into the area began. As the frontier of settlement approached the lead region, the pioneers attracted by the prospect of wealth threw out a salient in advance of the agricultural frontier. One significant fact concerning the early settlement of the southwestern part of the state was the direction of the movement. The laws which generally confine the migration of the human race to isothermal zones were set aside and the emigrants from the mild climate of Tennessee, Kentucky, and Missouri exchanged a mild climate for one in which during nearly half the year all nature is bound with ice and snow. In this is found the explanation of the fact that so many people of southern origin found their way into southwestern Wisconsin; they had been attracted by the lead and were guided by the Mississippi River into the mineral lands.

About 1830 there began a stream of miners from Cornwall, England, that has left in the lead region thousands of descendants. It is estimated that in 1850 there were about 6 thousand native Cornish in Wisconsin.

Many came to the lead region of the upper Mississippi valley to mine lead but remained to farm when the agricultural frontier had overtaken them. The fertile upland prairies were easily made productive with wheat and corn as important crops. The ease with which the land could be farmed brought the prairies into competition with the lead as a dominant element of the environment.

Eastern Ridges and Lowlands: Southeastern Wisconsin as a regional division has come to mean that portion of the state having the highest economic development and containing within its indefinite borders the major portion of the population. The region is not everywhere naturally delineated, nor has it the same combination of physical conditions over the whole area; but the distribution and the concentration of the inhabitants gives it sufficient unity to warrant regional analysis.

Within the region known as southeastern Wisconsin there were two early settlements. Green Bay, the most important, was situated strategically near the mouth of the Fox River. In 1634 Nicolet ascended the Fox River which later became the natural route to eastern Wisconsin. The orientation of the natural waterways from the eastern sea coast directed population into the Fox Valley. It is only logical that a military post should have been erected at the Fox River mouth.

The settlement of southeastern Wisconsin after 1832 is epochal. The lead region was first settled by a final wave of great migration; but it was not until after 1832, when the danger from Indian attack had been ended, that the southeastern portion of the state was opened to settlers. The end of the frontier struggles and the "hard times" in the eastern cities combined to stimulate a new wave of migration.

After 1832 the southeastern part of Wisconsin began to tap the stream of western migration and by 1850 most of the area from Lake Michigan to the Lead region and northwestward toward the Fox River was settled, and the frontier moved on by 1850 across the Fox and Lower Wisconsin Rivers. The indefinite boundary between the settled and the unoccupied lands was a progressively shifting agricultural frontier. The westward and northward movement of the frontier up to 1850 had left behind it over 90 per cent of the total population or 287,730 settlers including 37,225 in the lead mining region of the southwest.

The newcomers distributed themselves over southeastern Wisconsin as a thin film of population. They entered first the better lands in the southern tiers of counties where the open prairie offered attractive conditions to the pioneer. Where the prairies were too extensive, the central portions remained unoccupied for a few years. The borders of the prairies offered an ideal combination of woodland for fuel and building materials and a prairie area for plowland.

The value of any area for agricultural purposes is largely determined by the natural landscape—soil and climate—and by proximity to other areas and ideas. But even under almost ideal environmental conditions a region might remain undeveloped. The land of any area is important for the human opportunity it represents, but the use which is made of the land depends upon the people who come into their possession.

In southeastern Wisconsin there has developed a sectionalism where the conditions of the physical landscape were more or less uniform except for a difference in the natural vegetation. The southern part of this area was characterized by the open oak forest with extensive prairies. Just to the north of the southern tier of counties was a hardwood forest of maple and of some oak and beech.

In the settlement of southeastern Wisconsin there was enacted what may be called an experiment in historical geography. The southern division was settled by the eastern Americans and British and the forested section by Teutons. These homeseekers were not destitute, and with the credit extended to them by friends the purchase of a farm was looked upon as a method of creating an estate. Large farms were the rule.

The number of Germans in Wisconsin before 1950 formed an important nucleus which determined the population conditions in the forest sections of eastern Wisconsin. Because these German immigrants were at the bottom of the economic ladder they settled in the woods. They could not afford to encounter the risk of taking ideal farm land in the Congress Land district, nor could they afford to buy such land from speculators. The Germans who settled in the rural communities generally purchased small farms from 40 to 80 acres. This centralization had the effect of creating a dense rural population in the area which was originally a maple forest. Even today no section of Wisconsin has so dense a rural population as this German settled section.

In a generation or two the forest has been removed and the two sections were essentially vegetatively the same. Both the German settled section northwest of Milwaukee and the Yankee settled strip along the southern tier of counties present a cultural landscape of beauty and prosperity.

Northern Wisconsin: The westward march of the frontier across the United States by-passed northern Wisconsin. In the 1870's the population of the state increased 24.7 per cent; Iowa showed an increase of 36.1 per cent, Minnesota gained 77.6 per cent. It is evident that the advance into Wisconsin had been slowed down. The northern part of the state lies off the principal highways followed by the home seekers. Furthermore the prairie land to the west offered greater opportunities to agriculturalists than did the heavily forested land to the north.

In northern Wisconsin the advance of the series of frontiers did not follow either in point of time or in type the sequence in southern Wisconsin. The frontier of the hunter and trader had a longer lease of life and reluctantly gave way before the cutting edge of the lumberman's frontier. For almost half a century the pioneer woodmen extended their salients up the rivers and later along the railroads until the forest was separated into isolated areas of pine.

During the period from 1850 to 1880 the movement of population into Wisconsin completed the agricultural settlement of that part of the state underlain by Paleozoic rock. In the forested northern highlands thin threads of settlement followed the rivers, road and railroads leaving isolated blocks of untouched wilderness. By 1880 the frontier of settlement had crossed Wisconsin, but within the state there remained wilderness sections around the periphery of which the frontier slowly encroached and penetrated.

The westward movement involved the wasteful removal of the forest to prepare land for agriculture. This was the guiding principal as the frontier marched northward. But as the frontier advanced, the destruction of the forest did not leave in its wake farm land of such high potential value as in the southern part of the state. The idea of conservation came too late to save a part of the forest on land unsuited for agriculture. Because of the lack of easily cultivated prairies, the low intrinsic value of the land, and the severer climatic conditions, the agricultural frontier passed very lightly across the northern part of the state leaving in its wake only a very sparse population.

The settlement of the prairie areas of the Mississippi and Missouri Valleys created a demand for lumber which the Upper Lake country supplied. The removal of the forest for its lumber content was the principal motive in clearing the land, and not its agricultural value.

Just as the fur trader pioneered into the wilderness of northern Wisconsin, the lumbermen overlaid a new industry on the site of the old. The settlement of the treeless prairies of the upper Mississippi River created a demand for lumber. The Wisconsin and Mississippi rivers and their tributaries not only drained water from the pine covered northern Wisconsin, but also conveyed the lumber into the prairie boom. For forty years lumbering was the dominant interest in the northern half of the state. Along the rivers hundreds of saw mills arose, and around these mills grew the lumbering towns such as La Cross, Oshkosh, and Eau Clair. Coincident with the development of the lumber industry and necessary to its successful prosecution was the development of extensive railroad networks. The railroads brought the "piny" within easy reach of the markets.

The Central Plain: The central plain is a conspicuous physiographic region in the central part of Wisconsin. The original pine forest made the area much like the glaciated portion of the northern highland and in a similar way has retarded the agricultural invasion of the area.

The region is infertile by southeastern Wisconsin standards and offers only slight opportunities for agriculture. It was the first barrier to the settlement of the land to the north.

The sandy central low land had patches of silt loams within the larger areas of sand, and a few farmers who were fortunate in the location of their farms were reasonably prosperous. There were, however, hundreds of farmers who abandoned their farms after a few years' trial, and recently the question of taxes has become serious.

Western Upland: The topography of the western upland is a gently rolling plain with locally capping limestone which has preserved wide interstream areas well suited to intensive agricultural development. Originally the region was covered by a hardwood forest except for a strip of prairie land along the uplands toward the north.

In 1850 there were about 9000 people in the part of the Western upland which lies beyond the lower Wisconsin. An examination will show that there was a wave of settlement that progressed northward across the upland. The more southern counties were settled in the decade of the 1850's, the central portion in the 1860's and 1870's, and the more northern region in the 1880's.

It is evident that the hilly Western Upland did not retard settlement, but its ruggedness has kept the density of the rural population below that of the southeastern part of the state. Furthermore the Western Upland lies on the wrong side of the state to benefit from the commercial activities dominant along Lake Michigan and thus is handicapped under modern economic conditions.