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Development of Portage Halted By the Coming of the Railroads

Fox-Wisconsin Water Route Early Promised This City Chance To Be One Of Largest In State

THE fate of invention in improving transportation so marks the development of a country that a city destined to become a large commercial center may be turned aside in its path of progress to only become a third or fourth class municipality. Such a fate came to Portage as the result of the development of the railroads in Wisconsin. For a time the development of the Fox-Wisconsin water route marked Portage with the possibility of becoming one of the largest cities in the state. And then the railroads came to make the water route system a back number.

In the early development of the state Portage was lavishly favored by nature. Standing on the little isthmus of land between the Fox and Wisconsin rivers routes a panorama of important personages crossed its acres. The authentic history of Portage may be said to begin June 14, 1673, with the passage of Marquette and Joliet over the portage on their historic journey down the Mississippi river. In commemoration of this event, the Waupun chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, October 19, 1905, erected at the intersection of Bronson and Wisconsin streets in the city of Portage a monument of red granite, rock faced, except upon one side which bears the following inscription:

"This tablet marks the place near which Jacques Marquette and Louis Joliet entered the Wisconsin River, June 14, 1673."

Visit of La Hontan

The next visit of importance to the portage was made in 1687 by Baron La Hontan, a French writer, who has left a description of this primeval country in his book, "New Voyages." In 1766 Jonathan Carver, an English writer, who was to lay claim to the lands in northern Wisconsin passed this way on his trip to St. Anthony Falls on the Mississippi river.

"In 1778 the portage became the rendezvous of an expedition under Charles Gautier," says Inez C. Merrill in a thesis on this subject. "The St. Louis Expedition passed over the portage in 1786. In the same year Joseph Anisee, Council of Indians at the portage, delivered a message from the governor of Mackinac to the savages of the region. A fur trading post was established in 1800, and in 1810 the overland division of the Astorian Expedition to the Pacific went westward by way of the portage.

"The portage became an important military highway. Major S. H. Long visited the spot in 1817 and 1823 on government exploring expeditions. In 1819 the Fifth regiment of U. S. infantry made the portage on its way from Ft. Howard on Green Bay to Ft. Crawford on the Mississippi. In 1826 a

flotilla of thirty-five boats carrying the Third U. S. infantry from Green Bay to St. Louis passed over the portage. General Cass in 1827 made the portage, investigating the feeling of the Winnebagoes toward the United States government. Thus we see that the Fox-Wisconsin portage was used for about a century as the most convenient and safest passageway between the east and the northwest. During this time it was explored by both the French and the English."

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Portage Established

Many causes led to the establishment of a fort at the portage between the Fox and Wisconsin rivers. Forts had already been erected at Green Bay and at Prairie du Chien. With Fort Howard at the northeastern terminus of the natural route of Indian and French discoverers, Fort Winnebago at the portage, and Fort Crawford at the southeastern end, the chain of fortifications would be complete, and the route would be comparatively safe.

Several conditions about the opening of the 19th century made the building of the fort at this time necessary. In 1800 John Jacob Astor, who was at the head of the American Fur company, had established a post at the portage. After the War of 1812 the company rapidly extended its operations into the valley of the Fox and Wisconsin rivers. The Winnebago Indians, who lived in this district, levied exorbitant tolls upon this fur trade. Consequently, Astor in 1828 appealed to the United States government to establish a military fort as a protection against these exactions.

Barracks Erected

Temporary barracks were erected for Ft. Winnebago by December 29th, 1828, and work was immediately started on the permanent buildings. It was garrisoned until the opening of the Mexican war in 1845, when most of the troops were removed, and an old soldier, Captain William Wier, was put in charge. In 1853 the fixtures and furniture was sold at public auction under direction of Jefferson Davis, who had spent much of his early life at the fort. A number of the buildings were destroyed by fire in 1856. The old wooden eagle that stood over the entrance is now in the Portage public library.

The earliest road built through Columbia county was built in 1832 by order of Louis Cass, secretary of war, because of expectations of Indian troubles after the Black Hawk. This road was known as the old Military road and led from Ft. Howard to Fort Winnebago and thence to Fort Crawford.

In 1837 a territorial road was opened, which during certain seasons of the year was more popular than the Military road. It led from Fort Winnebago to Marcellon, thence northeast until it intersected the Military road at Fond du Lac.

"The River Times" for November 21, 1856, says:

"Forty-three heavy teams left this

city one day last week, loaded with merchandise and supplies for our neighbors at the North. Many families come here a distance of twenty, forty, and sixty miles to shop. The splendid valley of the Lemonweir, the Necedah, the Yellow river, the Rocke-cris, and other tributaries of the Wisconsin have been settled rapidly and Portage is the natural point for trade. Men who are acquainted with the facts inform us that the trade of Portage for the past two years has been considerable greater than that of Madison. In 1850, Elias Thomas hauled goods to the fort from Milwaukee by team. This route was kept up until 1856."

By 1850 the eastern portion of the state was nearly all settled, so emigration was seeking the West, and Fort Winnebago became the point from which settlement radiated. During the summer and fall of 1850, 10,000 persons with teams and stock crossed the Wisconsin in the neighborhood of the portage. The emigrants came through in large wagons drawn by from four to eight oxen. Sometimes they drove with them cattle, hogs, and sheep.

Urged Canal Development

Then came the agitation for the development of a canal and the improvement of the Fox river route that would result in making Portage an important commercial center. To make the route available for this new commerce, it was necessary that extensive improvements be carried on. The first act for improvement was in 1846. It was for the specific purpose of improving the rivers and constructing a canal between them, and consisted of one-half the land for three miles on each side of the canal the Fox river and the lakes through which it passed. For a few years, the prospects for a speedy completion of the contemplated work seemed bright.

A steam dredge was constructed and put to work on the Upper Fox. Contracts were let for the canal and locks at Portage, and for the improvement of Rapids Croche. After many years of changing hands, the government finally gained control of the improvement of the highway. Considerable sums of money had been appropriated for the work, the greater part of which seems to have gone for damages to the property holders along the river. Work on the Fox river, particularly the part below Lake Winnebago, still continues and additional appropriations are continually made at the present. Six hundred and eighty thousand acres of land, nearly

two million dollars of private capital, and as much more in public money was expended on the two rivers, with apparently no results.

"The city of Portage," says Miss Merrill, "had much faith that the completion of the Fox-Wisconsin canal would make her the metropolis of central Wisconsin, but the introduction of the railroad made this an impossibility. The city continued to grow, but not in such unprecedented numbers as formerly. After the laying of the railroads, Portage received

only such trade as naturally centered around that region. A great share of the commerce intended for the North and West passed over various other railroad routes constructed at about the same time.

"Portage, itself, was in 1853 the terminus of five projected railroads. Some of the reasons for making Portage a railroad center were, its situation in the lumber region, and its position on the routes of immigration."

The influence of the railroads upon the settlement and the prosperity of the country in and about Portage is doubtless very great. Portage owes much of its population and business today to the fact that it is a railroad center.