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THE WISCONSIN DOMESDAY
BOOK

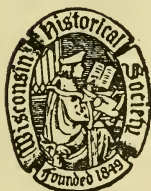
BY
JOSEPH SCHAFER



Reprinted from the *Wisconsin Magazine of History*
Volume IV, Number 1, September, 1920

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JOSEPH SCHAFER

Under date of May 20, 1920, I mailed to each member of the Board of Curators and to a selected list of historical specialists a paper containing suggestions for devoting the Burrows Fund income for a number of years to the preparation of a *Wisconsin Domesday Book*. I said:

"In my letter, dated December 26, 1919, to the President and Board of Curators of the Wisconsin Historical Society, I took the liberty of suggesting a plan for a future great history of Wisconsin which should reach very much further down in the social life of the state than any history that has yet been produced. The aim would be, I stated, to gather such abundant materials about our Wisconsin population as would enable us ultimately to point out the influence upon Wisconsin history of even very local and seemingly humble individuals who had contributed ideas or developed processes that helped forward the civilization of the state. Moreover, the proposed history would deal with all of the great elements of modern civilization, not merely with the political or the more picturesque social features."

In order that we may really be ready in the space, let us say, of twenty years, or, if possible in sixteen years, which will bring us to the centennial anniversary of the territory of Wisconsin, to produce some such history as I suggested it will be necessary to do a thoroughly systematic piece of work, covering a good many years, in the way of collecting and arranging the materials for it. We cannot depend upon a merely incidental method of assembling the records. It is true that this Society has already a vast collection, much of which is available for any future historical work.

But there are certain classes of data which neither this Society nor any other society has thus far made available but which, because we are already so forward in our collections, it is possible in this state to secure. It will be necessary, however, to go about it at once before the older settlers of our communities whose memories go back to the beginnings shall pass away.

Perhaps I can best indicate the character of the work which I propose by discussing it under the name of a *Wisconsin Domesday Book*. For I have in mind something quite as fundamental as the famous survey of English counties made in the reign of William the First, and much more complete with reference to the original population of the state. There is now in existence a plat book for the year 1915 which lists all of the rural land owners of the state and indicates the limits of their holdings, their names being written into the plat of each surveyor's township. Cities and even villages have generally provided similar records for their areas in recent years. No such complete tabulation exists for an earlier period. There are, however, county maps, and county plat books for most of the Wisconsin counties, which give similar data for the period around 1870. It would be a comparatively simple and inexpensive matter to bring together these county maps and plats into an atlas for, say, the years 1865-75; some of the county plats would be for the earlier years in that decade and some for the later years. But on the whole they would give valuable information for what is recognized as the middle period in Wisconsin history, the years immediately following the Civil War.

Nothing of the sort exists for the pioneer period. There are indeed some maps dating from the 40's and 50's, which show what land has been entered, and in some cases the names of prominent settlers are written into these maps. But there is no systematic geo-social survey. That is a

great deficiency and one which for historical purposes ought to be supplied. *There should be a plat book or atlas that will give the student of Wisconsin history immediate access to the names of first settlers in each section of the state, together with an ocular account of the lands they occupied, as these are located upon the plats.*

The utility of the proposed atlas must be evident from whatever angle it is viewed. Early civilization in Wisconsin, as in other western states, results primarily from the interaction of two forces; an agricultural population of several distinct origins and characters and a body of land which was at first almost free but which varied widely in natural fertility and in the ease with which it could be subdued to the uses of the farmer. The social historian needs to know in detail, at least for typical areas, the conditions under which the several classes of lands were occupied and the types of settlers who occupied them. He needs to know both how the settlers dealt with the land under varying circumstances and how the land reacted upon the settlers economically and socially. Numerous special studies interpretative of Wisconsin and of American history wait upon the preparation of such a working basis as we have proposed. The history of education, of morals, of social amelioration; the history of land values which is becoming a critical necessity of the age, all need to be illuminated by studies based on concrete facts for which a knowledge of the primary social and economic community elements is indispensable. Says Professor Frederick J. Turner (in a letter to the Superintendent): "I should make in selected areas, detailed study of the correlations between party votes, by precincts, wards, etc., soils, nationalities and state-origins of the voter, assessment rolls, denominational groups, illiteracy, etc. What kind of people tend to be Whigs, what Democrats, Abolitionists, etc.? This can be ascertained by

such studies, and it would be the first time such correlations have been worked out on any considerable scale."

Our problem then is how to obtain a record showing precisely when every piece of land in the given area (township or county) passed into the hands of a private cultivator so that it could begin to function in civilization building, and who it was that assumed the responsibility of making it function. The settler represents the family; and the family is the unit in social studies.

The surveyor's township is the most convenient territorial unit for our purpose because it is the government's starting point in preparing to make sales of its lands to private individuals. The original surveyor of a given township placed on record a plat showing its subdivisions down to one-fourth of a quarter section or forty acres; he also represented the rivers, lakes, or other similar geographic features occurring in that area, thus making a detailed map of the township. The surveyor's field notes contain in addition a concise description of the land as it was seen by him in running the section lines. For example, on the line between sections 5 and 6, in township 7—1 W, Sylvester Sibley, the surveyor (1833), notes: "Land level and first rate. Thinly timbered with oak." And there is a similar comment for every mile traced. The government sold its lands in tracts of forty acres or multiples thereof. The record in the land office tract book, which is arranged by townships and sections, gives the description of the tract purchased; its contents; price paid; form of payment, whether in cash or in military land warrant, etc.; the date of purchase; and name of purchaser, with some other data. In the United States land office at Wausau, Wisconsin, are found all the records of all the land offices ever maintained in this state. Under a law of 1883 the officers of the land offices are authorized to furnish to citizens, at the fixed rate of four dollars each, plats of townships showing "form

of entries, names of claimants, character of entry, number, and date of filing or entry together with topography, etc.” The state land office at Madison has all similar data for entries of state land.

The process of securing the atlas of original private grantees of the land thus becomes fairly simple, and we have already followed it through in a sufficient number of individual cases to enable us to test its working and to report intelligently upon its availability. We have ordered plats from the land office in Wausau. These were made in the usual way and at the legal price. We have then obtained from the state land office the record of sales by the state to private individuals of lands located in these townships. And we have also obtained from the state land office the description of the land from the field notes of surveyors. With this supplementary material we have then completed the plats, writing state land entries in the appropriate subdivisions and inscribing the surveyor’s notes in the blank lines at the margin of the plat. The plat is then photostated and filed away. All copies are made from the photostatic negative.

From the interest which schools have already developed in local history study, under the leadership of the State Superintendent, county superintendents, and teachers, and from the peculiar adaptability of these township plats as material aids to this work, we have reason to anticipate that the Society will be called upon to furnish several copies of each plat to the schools. This will enable us to promote a praiseworthy educational movement which is directly in line with the Society’s interest and also to make some saving in the first cost of the township plats. Since the process of preparing the plats at the United States land office is necessarily slow, and the school officers in some counties are eager to have the Society supply copies of their townships in September, we have given the register of the

land office a number of advance orders to be filled during the summer.

As soon as some of the plats shall have been distributed to schools and other local groups, work will begin on the second phase of the plan which from its analogy to the process of making the historic *Domesday Book* might well be called

THE INQUEST

The object of this inquest will be to identify the pioneer owner of every farm in the township, the creator, out of the raw land, of every self-supporting home.

The primitive land was in part bought or entered by persons who never became settlers. At certain periods, especially, speculators were eager purchasers of both government and state land. Many names, sometimes oft repeated, of men prominent in later Wisconsin history appear on the plats. Occasionally some distinguished or famous name appears, like that of Daniel Webster, who was the purchaser of several tracts in Dane County.¹ There are personal reasons why the land speculators are often especially worthy of biographical study; and besides, the business of speculation is one feature of land history that requires special treatment. But the speculators do not figure as settlers or cultivators, and in this inquest we are seeking to identify the settlers. This can be done only through local inquiry which should not be unduly deferred, for the remaining pioneers whose memories must be relied on to assist are daily becoming fewer. Another reason for avoiding delay is the fact that farms are being broken up, two or three new ones taking the place of one original farm, which process as it progresses will greatly complicate the inquiry.

A questionnaire is being prepared to enable school teachers, high school pupils, and others, by interviewing

¹ The name of Edward Everett appears on the plat of township 6, range 11 east, as purchaser of section 26 and the east half of section 27.

pioneers of a given locality, to supply data for revising the plat showing "The Original Private Grantees of the Land," or rather for preparing a new plat showing "The Original Makers of Farms and Farm Homes." In another place (*The Wisconsin Farmer*) I have suggested that high school pupils might do much toward developing farm patriotism and at the same time furnish valuable information by preparing papers on: "The Pioneer Makers of Our Farm." Starting with the plat showing grantees of the land, which gives the beginning of every land title, the title deeds and abstracts show all changes of ownership down to the present. From those sources and the testimony of remaining pioneers, or from the evidence contained in other written documents, or in local newspapers, the actual settler of land originally entered by a speculator can be identified. Should this plan fail, there are, as we shall see, other ways of obtaining the local testimony concerning the pioneer farm makers, and the county abstract offices can supply the data for fixing the time and circumstances of their purchases of land from the speculative entrymen. The point to be kept steadily in mind is that the local testimony is indispensable to the completion of the survey. If we were absolutely sure of our list of speculators in all cases, and also sure that the party to whom the speculator sold a given tract of land was in every case a settler, the abstract office would supply all required data not furnished by the United States and State land offices. But obviously we cannot know these things.²

Some are skeptical as to the historical value of material derived through the means of interviews with pioneers who necessarily rely on their memories for their facts. The answer is that all depends on the type of information sought and the method of seeking it. Ask an octogenarian who has resided continuously in section 6, township 7, range 1 W

² Lands used for other purposes than farming, as for mining or lumbering, will necessarily have a somewhat specialized history.

since 1853: "When did J. Allen Barber sell the southeast quarter of the southeast quarter of this section to L. Felton?" and the answer, while perhaps definite in form, would be of little or no value. Ask him if L. Felton (to whom that particular tract entered by Barber in 1853 was patented in 1877) was the first actual settler upon it who made a farm of it, and the answer if definite would be practically conclusive. The date of Felton's purchase from Barber can be ascertained from the record either locally or at the county seat. That would give the approximate date of his settlement there.

The aim is, with the encouragement of questionnaires, to induce local inquirers to consult title deeds, abstracts, and other unquestioned local historical sources. I believe much can be done for us by teachers, high school pupils, and others in these ways. And everything that habituates the people to rely only on unimpeachable evidence will be a net gain to history and a net gain to our democracy which needs above most things a more general appreciation and understanding of the critical method of inquiry. The Society, therefore, as an institution designed to benefit all the people, can well afford to be patient even though local inquirers stumble at first in pursuing their inquiries. From the presence of the plats of original grantees in the local schools I am anticipating a powerful stimulation toward local history study among adults as well as children. If this interest materializes, it ought to be possible to have old settlers' meetings for an entire township at which someone appointed for the purpose would hold a genuine inquest covering all doubtful questions relative to first settlers. Such meetings might be timed to harmonize with school fêtes, so that the younger generation could get the benefit of contact with the pioneers and of their backward glance over the history of the community.

There are other kinds of information about settlers which can be obtained only from local sources and which are

of a nature to enable the historian to utilize them in the mass. So that even if in detail they be wanting in perfect accuracy, the general result is still truthful. Examples are statements as to where individuals and families came from; where others went when they left the township; reasons for emigration, etc. The collecting of photos, sketches, and descriptions of successive homes of the same family or of the same home at different periods will be a significant feature of the inquiry. A very interesting point will be to obtain local evidence concerning members of the younger generation who, growing up in the neighborhood, left it for the cities or for other states to gain a wider field for their talents.

Some have felt that it was hardly worth while to take account of *all* settlers because a large proportion of these had no historical significance. For two reasons I cannot accept this view. I think the time has come to recognize that the opening of every new farm in the American wilderness was an original creative process significant enough to deserve a line in the general record of civilization. And, if the original settler did nothing more than open a farm—and, even though he may have done that very badly—one of his children or descendants may at any moment compel attention to the record he made with ax and plow. It is well understood that the American frontier has been a socially conserving influence. It has always furnished *another chance* for those who failed elsewhere. Every area, therefore, shows a certain proportion of originally unpromising families who have surprised old neighbors and friends by the way in which they “made good.” The pioneer farm is a *home*, and the influence of an American home cannot be gauged by the character of its original founders. Such local inquiries as are here contemplated should result promptly in giving us clues to the more important pioneers, who could then be studied with greater particularity from such sources as can still be found.

THE GATHERING OF LOCAL SOURCES

A very important feature of the proposed plan is to make a detailed survey, by counties, of the local historical records in order that these may be available for the preparation of texts to accompany the plats when the *Domesday Book* for a given county shall be published, and for any other historical purposes. Well-trained men should be employed on these county surveys. They will be required to study the condition and contents of the county archives, the town records, school records, church records, records of fraternal societies, records of business houses, of manufactories, etc.; to locate collections of letters, diaries, farm account books; and especially to list the files and stray numbers of early local newspapers. The county investigator should become an authority on the affairs of his county from its pioneer beginnings and might very well pursue his investigations along the lines of an outline history of the county. In some cases he might actually be engaged from the outset in writing the history of the county. Other workers—local members of the Society, teachers, University students having homes there—should be encouraged to work up materials for writing the histories of townships, villages, or cities. In each case, the township plat of land grantees is the starting point. It is a fact known to every investigator that the most eager and indefatigable collector of materials in any field is the person who is writing or planning to write a history covering that field. In such cases the interest arising from research for the sake of a constructive result supplements and adds momentum to the interest in collection for its own sake. The pursuit of data thus becomes intense, as with the lawyer who is driving for the facts bearing on a special case. The question should therefore be carefully considered how far the work outlined above can be assigned to persons who shall have the status of research associates

on our staff but who shall be dealing intensively with local areas, especially counties.

THE WORK IN THE LIBRARY

Corresponding to the work which is to be done and promoted in the counties and local divisions, there will also be work carried on at the Library constantly. This work naturally divides itself into several branches: (a) First of all, there must be a secretary to keep in constant touch with the local history activities. Such person will formulate questionnaires to be used in the local work, open and keep up correspondence with the communities that are making inquiries concerning first settlers, and verify the results so far as these can be verified in Madison. Also, a good deal of the newspaper study of local characters can be carried on here contemporaneously with the study that the communities are engaged upon, for in a large number of cases it will be found that we have files of newspapers from the localities under investigation.

Another service which the home secretary at Madison can do will relate to the middle period atlas. This will not be a serious undertaking, but it will occupy at best a considerable amount of time. On its completion, an important study will be a comparison of the middle period atlas with the 1915 atlas, with a view to determining problems on the shifting of population, the change in size of farms, the substitution for American settlers of settlers of foreign birth, etc. The preparation of texts to accompany the atlas will require a large number of special studies, some of which can be going on continuously during the course of the making of the county plat books and of the catalogue representing our study of the social elements entering into the history of Wisconsin civilization.

MONOGRAPHIC STUDIES

Another feature of our preparation for the future great history must be the preparation and publication of a large number of monographs on special topics, the general aim being to digest and interpret masses of material. The work of collecting materials systematically in many lines such as phases of religious history, industrial history, agricultural history, educational history, biography, will involve a thorough study of particular institutions, men, and movements. The number and variety of the topics to be treated are large and as varied as are the elements entering into the complex of our civilization. Some of the monographic work ought to be done by members of the Society scattered over the state, and they would need the encouragement which always comes to a worker from the expectation that his results will be published. Some of it will naturally be done by University students in history. In their cases, also, a readiness on the part of the Society to publish acceptable papers will prove a great stimulus. Much of it will need to be done by specially trained investigators attached to the staff. Publication activity must be kept abreast of production.

RELIEF MAPS OF WISCONSIN COUNTIES

In connection with the *Domesday Book* there should be a large scale relief map of each county modeled according to accurate, scientific data, and representing also certain historical facts like the originally wooded or prairie character of the land. In the preparation of such county relief maps the Society will have the cooperation of the State Geological Survey.

SUMMARY

We shall need in order to carry out the above recommendations:

1. A field secretary of sound historical training to (a) prepare a guide to the county archives, and (b) begin the

- geo-social survey by counties. Some necessary assistance can be engaged in the counties under survey.
2. A home secretary of good training to promote community local history studies, to verify and organize the material sent in, and to work on the *Domesday Book* in other ways.
 3. Additional stenographic and clerical help varying in amount with the development of the survey.
 4. A fund for publishing the *Domesday Book*, which should be printed in parts, the material for each county constituting a part.
 5. A fund for the employment of research associates to prepare monographs.
 6. A fund for the publication of monographs.
 7. A fund for the preparation of county relief maps.

OTHER ACTIVITIES TO BE STIMULATED

The emphasis placed in this paper on the *Domesday Book*, with the activities growing out of it and supplementary to it, must not be taken to indicate a willingness to let other lines of activity suffer. I have merely pointed out an additional object to which, as I think, the Society ought to devote the whole or at least the greater part of the income from the Burrows Fund as soon as such income begins to accrue. Other activities of the Society, so generously supported by the state during the past two generations, are of course to go forward not merely at their customary pace, but with accelerated momentum. For all of those activities will be rendered more imperative and more purposeful by the new lines of development planned. The editing and publication of significant documentary material, the collecting of newspaper files, of maps and valuable manuscripts, the arranging of the papers of Wisconsin public men, the preparation and publication of calendars of the more significant collections of historical manuscripts, the preparation

and publication of checklists of the public documents of the state, and the building up of our magnificent historical library are objects in which the state is too deeply interested and to which it is too deeply pledged to permit any diminution of interest on the part of the Society's administration. In order to strengthen those lines of activity, and at the same time to meet the increased cost of service, materials, and printing, the Society cannot escape the necessity of calling upon the state legislature for an increase in the appropriation for the next biennium.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



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