

Chapter I - Town History

STUDY AREA

The Town of Vernon is located in the south central portion of Waukesha County. The Town is bounded on the north by Town of Waukesha, on the east by the City of Muskego and Village of Big Bend, on the south by Racine County, on the west by Town of Mukwonago and Village of Mukwonago. The Town contains approximately 20,960 acres, or 32.75 square miles, having been reduced from its original 36 square miles by the incorporation of the Village of Big Bend, annexations by the City of Muskego and the Village of Mukwonago, and the attachment of a portion of the Town of Vernon to the Town of Mukwonago. All of the remaining areas which constitute the Town of Vernon have been included in the study area.

HISTORY

The Town of Vernon began its existence as part of Muskego. On March 8, 1839 the Town of Vernon was created by an act of the State Legislature. The first Caucasian settlers in the Town were John Dodge, Prucius Putman, and Curtis B. and Onien Haseltine. They arrived from Andover, Vermont in November of 1836. Onien Haseltine is said to be responsible for naming the Town of Vernon which some feel seem to reflect his original home of Vermont, while others say the Town was named after Mt. Vernon.

An 1859 map of the Town shows that the original Dodges and Putman's lived in Sections 27 and 34. Onien Haseltine lived in Section 13. When the first four settlers made their claims in November of 1836, they built a cabin measuring 15' by 16' in an area later known as Dodges Corners, on property owned by Robert Bartholomew. The settlers found fine timber, fertile soils, a large supply of water courses and many curious mounds and embankments. A heavy growth of maple timber valuable for both firewood and sugar making was found along the Fox River. Streams provided power for milling and watering of stock. The sandy loam soils were found to be highly productive when properly cultivated.

Additional settlers arrived in the fall of 1836. Their claims were made in the following locations, according to the 1859 map: Ira Blood, Sections 19 and 30; Caius Munger, Section 19; and Leonard Martin, Section 24. Asa Flint was also among this group, though his claim was not shown on the 1859 map. In addition, Nelson K. Smith made claims and moved his wife and two children to the Town of Vernon in May of 1837. Mrs. Smith was considered to be the first Caucasian woman in the Town.

Onien Haseltine's house was the location of the first political meetings in the Town, including the first election, where Nelson K. Smith was chosen Town Chairman and Town Clerk. In 1841 and 1842 the Town meetings were held in Vernon Center, located on the Milwaukee/Mukwonago Plank Road. When L. Martin built his hotel, the southern influences in the Town moved the meetings to the site near Muskego, where they continued to be held through 1880. The southern influences were later overruled by their northern counterparts, and meetings were moved back to Vernon Center. Soon the rival factions compromised, and for several years held meetings at Mr. Munson's tavern, located on the Mukwonago Plank Road.

In April of 1837 Allen Haseltine, son of Onien Haseltine, was the first child born in the Town. The first wedding ceremony was celebrated on January 1, 1838 for the marriages of Prucius Putman and Emmeline Haseltine, and for Curtis Haseltine and Merial Thomas.

Asa Flint was the first Postmaster, residing over a post office in Vernon Center in 1839-1840. A few years later another post office was built in Big Bend where Aaron Putman was postmaster. Aaron and his brother Amos, who owned lands in Section 24 and 25, built and operated a sawmill in Big Bend from 1841 through 1868.

During the early history of Vernon, two distinctive communities developed. The north section of the Town was the site of many settlers from Scotland or of direct Scottish blood. In 1840, Neil McDougal traveled from New York to claim 500 to 600 woodland acres in the northwest part of the Town. That year his son-in-law, Findley Fraser and family, joined Alex Foss and family from Elgin, Illinois to settle on McDougal's land. These first Scottish settlers were soon followed by others of Scottish descent, including James Beggs who located in Sections 7 and 12, Robert Weir who settled in Sections 13 and 14, John McKinsey who settled in Section 1, and Gunther and William Guthrie who settled in Sections 1, 7 and 8. Mr. Beggs claimed that he was the first Scotchman to cast a ballot in Vernon.

From 1841 through 1849 the Scotch families of Donald Stewart, Duncan Cameron, Hugh Fraser, William Emsly, Charles Stewart, John and Thomas Howe, Angus and John McNaughton settled in the area. In 1910 Jane Stewart, then still living in Vernon, said that she owned the original land given to her father, Charles Stewart, and signed by President James Tyler.

The Town's Scotch ancestors brought with them their strong religious beliefs, and gathered together for religious worship in the Presbyterian faith. Their first meetings were held in the barn of Robert Weir, then in various homes and a school house. In 1859 the United Presbyterian Church was built, with Archibald Stewart being the overseer.

The southwest corner of the Town of Vernon was part of the community generally known as Caldwell's Prairie, which also encompassed areas in the vicinity of the Village of Mukwonago. In 1835 Joseph and Tyler Caldwell and their families traveled from Hubbard Town, Vermont and settled about three miles from Kenosha, then known as Pike River. Abraham Resseguie, William Cheney, and Clavin Gault moved to Caldwell's Prairie. At the time the Resseguie family moved to Caldwell's Prairie about 100 Pottawatomie Indians lived in Mukwonago. Their pow-wows could be heard at night. In 1836, members of the Vernon section of Caldwell's Prairie arrived: Henry Camp in Section 30, Ira Blood in Section 30/31, Wilder Champin in Section 20, and Whitney Hudson in Section 31 staked their claims in 1837. Other Caldwell Prairie neighbors shown in 1859 mapping included the Porter and Craig families. Their descendents continue to live in the Town.

Grammatic evidence remains of the Town's first inhabitants. Twenty-nine historic mounds said to be burial grounds of Native Americans known as the Mound Builders, are located on the Born farm in Section 21 (previously owned by the Dewey's after 1920 and the Hollisters before 1920). Most of the mounds are enclosed in a park-like area enclosed by giant oaks. In 1956, Mrs. Sylvia Dewey, whose family once owned the mound area, said that their family often found arrowhead hatchets and other items left by the first settlers in the Town of Vernon.

