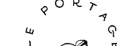


# Historic Portage, WI Downtown & Waterfront Walking Tour

## Portage: The Commercial Center of North Central Wisconsin

The Portage business district lies along a hillside which overlooks the Portage Canal. The buildings now in the city's downtown were once part of a bustling, urban commercial center serving a large region across north central Wisconsin. The building of the city paralleled its commercial prominence between the Civil War's end and the second decade of the 20th century.

 Portage emerged at this place because of its unique position along the one and a half mile strip of marshy floodplain between the Fox and Wisconsin Rivers. By the end of the 17th century, the Fox-Wisconsin waterway, linked at The Portage, served as the major fur trade thoroughfare between Green Bay and Prairie du Chien. It was not until the 1780s and 1790s that traders built their posts and warehouses at each end of The Portage. In 1828, the federal government recognized the strategic economic importance of The Portage and built Fort Winnebago at the Fox River end.

Development of the state's resources necessitated the movement of bulk cargo to the Great Lakes. Navigated by canoes for over 100 years, the Fox-Wisconsin waterway underwent improvement for steamboat traffic beginning in the late 1830s. The improvements linking Portage and its canal to the lower Fox industrial cities of Neenah, Menasha, Appleton, Fond du Lac and Green Bay were sufficient to carry barges of lumber and bulk farm goods by the 1850s. The building of the 26 lift locks along the entire Fox was not completed until 1875. Increasingly serving as pleasure crafts, steamboats plied the Fox system until well after the 1900s. Shifting sand bars defeated efforts to improve navigation of the Wisconsin through a system of wing dams. These efforts were abandoned after 1886.

In 1857 and 1858, the railroad linked Portage to the major commercial centers of Milwaukee and LaCrosse. The Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul constructed a regional railroad center in north Portage in the 1860s. In 1877, the Wisconsin Central connected south Portage to Ashland and Milwaukee. These connections assured Portage its role in the commercial development of the state and eventually absorbed the bulk cargo carried along the canal.

Two small communities emerged along The Portage in the 1830s: one at the fort and another near The Portage's west end. The third settlement, on the hill, that became Portage City awaited the 1851 purchase of Menominee lands ceded in 1848. The business district began as several stores and dwellings at the juncture of Cook, Main, and DeWitt in the late 1840s. With land surveys completed in 1851, citizens under the leadership of Joshua Guppey had the business district platted in 1852. <sup>26</sup>

After 15 years of controversy, Winnebago settlement (now Portage) won the county seat in 1851. The community incorporated as Portage City in 1854.


With these achievements, Portage citizens began to build their city. Its role as a supply center for logging operations along the upper Wisconsin River supported its construction boom. On February 2, 1850, Portage's "River Times" reported construction of 200 buildings in a year's time. "Among them are stores of all description, mechanics' shops, taverns, offices, Ec., Ec." The building at Portage continued until the depression of 1857.

As late as the 1860s, Portage stood as an urban pace and seat of government at the center of a lightly settled agricultural area. Historian Frederick Jackson Turner described Portage of the 1870s as a "little town" emerging into a city from a frontier society. His boyhood memories recalled the raftsmen who came to Portage from the northern pineries, and the many immigrants who composed the city's population.

By 1865, much of Portage's agricultural hinterlands were settled, and Portage grew to serve them. The city expanded rapidly along its main streets: east and west along Cook, and north and south along adjacent Main, DeWitt, and Wisconsin. The two and three story, long narrow brick

Oval logo above is from the American Guide Series: Portage; Works Progress Administration (WPA), 1938.  
The Square line drawing above is drawn from a tile in the cornice of 101 West Cook St. <sup>11</sup>

## Historic Portage: Downtown & Waterfront Walking Tour & Local History Guide

 Our tour is designed to originate at the Chamber Mall, 301 West Wisconsin St., as indicated on the map on page 13. Each of 25 sites numbered in the booklet and on the map also bears a walking tour number plaque visible from the street. We recommend you stand across the street from the building you are viewing and reading about so you can see the second story clearly. Line drawings of remaining architectural details are printed for each building. They are to aid matching the current structure to the historic photograph and define architectural styles.

*We hope you enjoy this view of Portage's past, as well as Portage of today.*



*The Chicago & Wisconsin Valley Street Railway Switched from horse drawn trolleys to electric models, seen here at the Chamber Mall about 1912.*

This brochure is dedicated to Frederica Kleist who was born shortly after the above picture was taken. It is because of her tireless efforts that the Portage Canal was placed on the National Register of Historical Places. Her successes in preserving Portage's history have been exemplary and should in themselves be recorded in history.

This brochure was prepared with materials from the "Intensive Historical Architectural & Historical Survey of the City of Portage," Wisconsin State Historical Society 1993, and the National Register Nominations for the "Portage Retail Historic District" & "Industrial Waterfront Historic District"; Wisconsin State Historical Society 1995 which were partially funded by the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, & prepared by Dr. Joyce McKay, Historical Archeologist and Preservation Consultant.

The brochure was funded in part by Mainstreet Portage, Inc., the Portage Tourism Promotion Committee, Portage Area Chamber of Commerce, Fox-Wisconsin Rivers Heritage Corridor, Portage Downtown Business Improvement District, and private donations.

*By Kathy Taylor, Joyce McKay and Fred Galley*

*Research by Joyce McKay & Kathy Taylor*

*Photographs copied and preserved by*

*Fred Galley, Galley Studios, Portage*

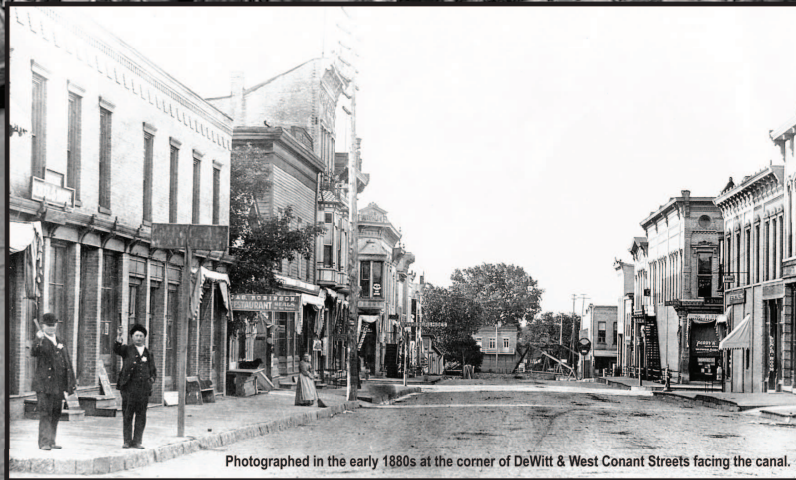
*Line Drawings by Ron Pontiatowski*

*Photographs digitally restored, maps redrawn and layout*

*by Judy Crook, JC Designs, Portage*

*Printed by The Communiqué Shop, Portage*

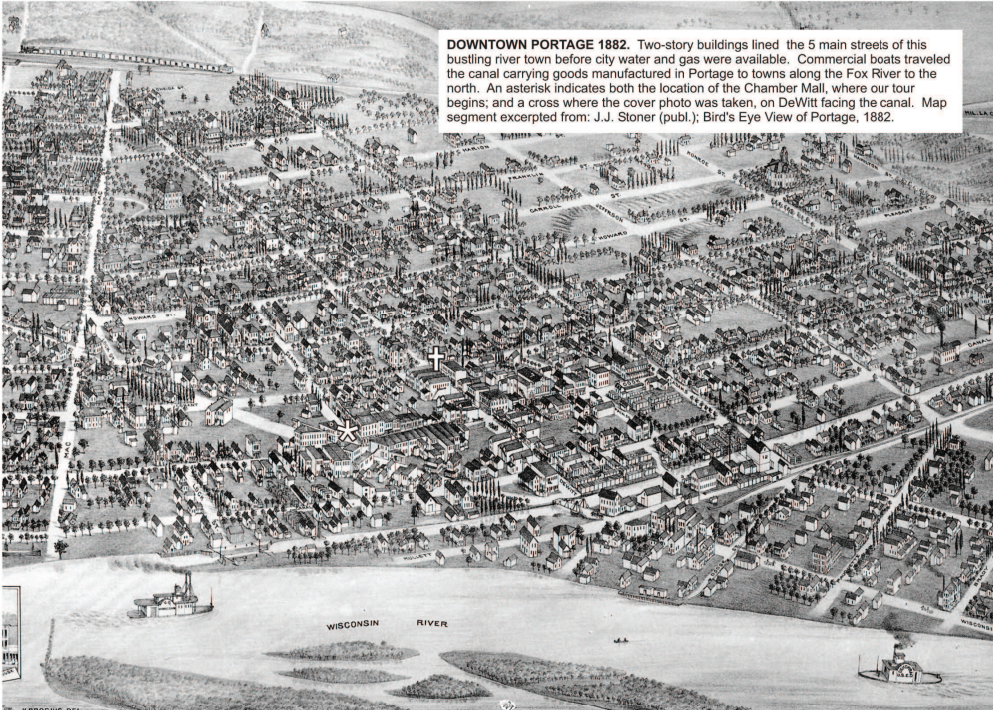
*First published 1995, Revised 2004*



*Photographed in the early 1880s at the corner of DeWitt & West Conant Streets facing the canal.*

**P.A.T.H.S.** ...of rediscovery  
Portage Area Trails & Heritage System, Inc.





DOWNTOWN PORTAGE 1882. Two-story buildings lined the 5 main streets of this bustling river town before city water and gas were available. Commercial boats traveled the canal carrying goods manufactured in Portage to towns along the Fox River to the north. An asterisk indicates both the location of the Chamber Mall, where our tour begins, and a cross where the cover photo was taken, on DeWitt facing the canal. Map segment excerpted from: J.J. Stoner (publ.); Bird's Eye View of Portage, 1882.

business blocks towered above many portions of Cook Street by the late 1860s and 1870s.

Between this period and the early 1900s, these enterprises included mercantile stores which sold everything from local farm products and foods arriving by railroad to cloth, small farm implements, and wholesale goods to northern Wisconsin. Several large retail and wholesale drugstores and groceries, hardware stores with tinmiths and implement sales, hotels with their dining and meeting rooms, inevitable saloons, liverys, meat markets, bakeries, jewelry stores, clothing & shoe shops, banks, and English and German newspaper offices all lined the streets of Portage's downtown. Founded and published under the leadership of Andrew Jackson Turner in 1861, the Wisconsin State Register, now the Portage Daily Register, chronicled the development of the city and region. Its craft shops, including several large cobbler and harness shops, cabinetmaking and furniture retail shops, wagon shops, and blacksmiths produced the goods needed by local consumers.

Portage became the center for several large merchant tailor shops. These skilled craftsmen produced custom-made clothing for customers across northern Wisconsin. Several industries also located near Cook included a brewery, a stone monument company, cigar factories, and clothing and rug manufacturers.

A small industrial and commercial area developed along the south bank of the canal by the 1840s. In the 1850s and 1860s, a lumber mill, tannery, foundry, and grain mill prospered along its bank. By 1867, the Portage & Green Bay Transportation Company's steamboats and barges carried the city's goods along the canal and into the Fox. Mid-sized industries such as the Wentworth grain elevator, Portage Hosiery Company, and the Portage Iron Works replaced the earlier industries along E. Mullett. The canal and Wisconsin Central RR, as well as the Milwaukee & St. Paul, also served the city's wholesale dealers. Flour and grain, grocery, produce, fruit, coal, implement, and lumber warehouses clustered around Mullett St.

A nationwide depression beginning in 1857, lasted intermittently well beyond the Civil War. Prolonged elsewhere because of restricted access to markets, in Portage the depression was less severe because of the canal

and river connections for regional trade. During the 1870s, for example, no businesses on Cook St. are known to have failed. Following the 1873 Depression a new business cycle again brought rapid expansion to the city.

As the Portage business district flourished in the 1880s, the city developed municipal improvements. It built its first waterworks to provide city water in 1887. The year before, the American Gas Company of Beloit introduced gas lighting along its streets, in public buildings, and in 40 dwellings. Portage was an early Wisconsin community to receive this amenity. Limited telephone service was first established in the city in 1883. "Electricity generated by battery by Henry Forbes was turned on for the first time in his father's jewelry store before a crowd of breathlessly averted spectators standing ankle deep in dust on DeWitt St., [No. 316], about 1885. The tiny gleam from this one carbon lamp was a sensation."<sup>1</sup> The private generator of the I.W. York mill in north Portage produced sufficient power to run electric lights in the city by 1901.

The community congregated in its many meeting and lodge halls above the commercial buildings. These organizations fulfilled a wide range of vital community functions. They entertained, organized sports, provided welfare, assisted the workingman and farmer, and furthered civil betterment. Portage gathered to enjoy theatrical performances, minstrel shows, and lectures at its opera house.<sup>2</sup> The city was the primary place for everything from the circus to salesmen traveling between Milwaukee and Minneapolis. By the early 20th century, the movie theatres replaced these itinerant performers.

Like other urban centers across Wisconsin, Portage gained its own electric street car system which operated between 1909 and 1916. The service traveled along DeWitt, Edgewater, and W. Wisconsin connecting the train stations with the downtown. Until the active use of automobiles required parking spaces in the business district beginning in the 1950s, the multi-story buildings continued to crowd the blocks leaving narrow corridors for its streetscapes.

1. Wisconsin State Register, April 19, 1879, pg 2, col 2.  
2. Malkby, L., Interview, 1993.



## Daily Life in the Downtown...



## ...of the 1870s and 1880s



Advertisement for Parry & Muir, Case Dry Goods House, located at 217 West Green Street, Portage, Wis. The ad includes a date stamp 'April 2 1882' and a handwritten note: 'Dear Brother John At last I've got started writing to you I really do feel ashamed of my self for forgetting myself given I think is here & the 1 to you last he more a good a to raise no in the way no fall was we had to say they were born then the that the pay off I want to me I to run just for you for mine Snow's How I friends & still single in the hole will be...'. Below the ad is a small notice: 'The letter reproduced in part, with permission of John Muir Papers, Holt-Atherton Dept. of Spec. Collections, Univ. of the Pacific Libraries, Copyright 1984 Muir-Hanna Trust.' followed by a list of references 1 through 5.

# Wisconsin State Register

Portage, Columbia County, Wisconsin, Saturday, June 23, 1882.

ON THE Portage of the Fox and Wisconsin Rivers... (COMPILER BY FRED J. TURNER.) The Grignon claim, comprising a considerable portion of the land between the Fox and Wisconsin rivers where the city of Portage now stands, belonged to what is known as the sixth class of land claims, in the territory of Michigan. This class was composed of occupancies and extinguishments of native right, by individuals since the country has appertained to the United States. As early as 1802, objections were given to the Indian Agent by the Secretary of War to investigate and report the titles of this country. Subsequent acts providing for commissioners to meet at Detroit to decide on land claims passed in 1807, 1812, 1830. The fifth section of the act of 1830, entitled "An act to regulate in force certain acts for the settlement of land claims in the territory of Michigan," reads as follows (see 22 Stat. at Large, 17th Congress, 2d session, p. 47): "And he it further enacted, that any person who, on the first day of October, 1802, occupied and cultivated the land which he claims as his own, or by said occupant, living with him, and who has not been extinguished by the act of Congress, shall be entitled to the same as if he had been a citizen of the United States, and shall be entitled to the same as if he had been a citizen of the United States, and shall be entitled to the same as if he had been a citizen of the United States." The title eventually turned for the worse however, and Parry & Muir declared bankruptcy 14 years later, in March, 1892. John Muir returned to Portage that April, too late to purchase the merchandise back and save the family's 27 year investment in the store. Debts to investors exceeded the value of the merchandise as it was found that Parry had taken close to \$10,000 of the firm's working capital. By late April John left Portage and took David with him. David had voluntarily agreed to repay 50% of the debt that remained, "Then although the gossips still wagged their heads, he was allowed to go." His sister Annie recounted, "People who have known David nearly all of their lives, and had perfect confidence in him are now ready to listen...even to reports which would prove positive rascality on his part. Perhaps you can imagine something of the pain and mortification it has brought with crushing weight on David's honest heart..." With David to shoulder the management of the ranch for him in California, John Muir was able to devote more attention to land preservation causes. He became, more so since the words had been written, the man who "finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, Sermons in stone..." John Muir, one of the key organizers of the Sierra Club, served as its president throughout his life, and founded the world's first National Parks in the process of winning battles to save Yosemite, the Grand Canyon, and the Sequoias.

## The Turners: Historians in Portage & in Wisconsin

The U.S. population jumped from 47 million in 1877 to 67 million in 1893. Counties in newer states such as Wisconsin burgeoned from a few hundred to five or ten thousand people in less than five years. The profound sense of social dislocation could rapidly be redressed by such men as Andrew Jackson Turner who came to Portage in 1855, aged 23, with the proverbial suitcase. His voice became that of his townspeople through his local newspaper, that of his region as a County Board Supervisor, and reverberated statewide in serving the Assembly and Senate. As State Railroad Commissioner between 1878 and 1882 he pulled the railroads through Portage. His voice wielded not only economic power, but his meticulous collection of settlement data, census data, records of local commerce, land entries, and oral histories, provided a lens to focus his son's vision directly on the accelerated social and economic change. It was his son, Frederick Jackson Turner, who defined for Americans their frontier history, for he believed that its study could illuminate the broader story of America. His "frontier thesis, first expressed in 1893 is the single most influential essay ever written by an American historian."<sup>2</sup> Turner was awarded the Pulitzer prize for his essays on the frontier in American history.

Turner's first published piece, reprinted in part in the background, is from June 23rd, 1883 Wisconsin State Register, formerly edited by his father. He describes the "Grignon Tract" of 1823 where most of Portage and the Canal are now located. A pioneer, LeCuyer, which Turner had seen exhumed at the age of six, "I remember seeing them [the bones] carried away from the place described as the grave of LeCuyer, and doubtless among these relics were those of the pioneer himself."<sup>3</sup> This reverent memory combined with original research was an undergraduate class paper written when he was 22.

1. Turner, Andrew Jackson; Columbia County Tree, 1904. Publ. by Wisc. St. Register, Portage.  
2. Cronon, Wm., Landscape and Home, Wisc. Mag. of History, (Winter, 1990-1991) Vol. 74.  
3. Wisconsin State Register, June 23, 1883, front page.

# Retail Historic District

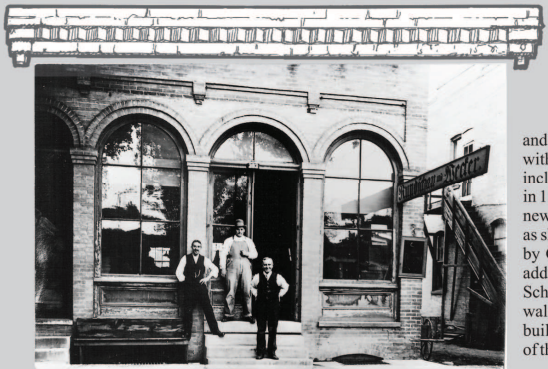


**1.**  
314-322  
West  
Wisconsin  
Street  
Fisher-  
Paramount  
Theatre

The Fischer-Paramount Theater Company erected this building in 1927 under the name of Brin's Theater Company. It was built in tandem with the Raulf Hotel. One of Fischer-Paramount's operating officers, Frank J. McWilliams, purchased the theater in the depression, at an auction on the Court House steps in 1930. F. J. McWilliams formed the Portage Theater Corporation and ran the establishment until it was taken over by his son, John McWilliams Sr., from 1954-79. In 1974-75 the sidewalk marquis, shown in the picture above, was removed. Taken over in 1979 by his grandson, John E. McWilliams, this third generation business remains in its original building. Rehabilitated for modern use, theatres 1 and 2 were installed in 1985, and theatre 3 in 1987.<sup>1</sup> The original facade remains unchanged. The inside originally contained a stage, scenery with asbestos curtains, and dressing rooms as well as the movie screen and projection booth. When the theater opened, the company produced live entertainment accompanied by the "Barton Organ." Its shows featured Vaudeville acts and live stage performances along with movies. This Period Revival Commercial building with its classical ornament, as shown above in the line drawing, was designed to attract the public to its doors through its elegance.

<sup>1</sup> McWilliams, John E., interview, 1995.

**3.**  
233 West Cook Street  
John Bassi, Musical Instruments



John Bassi, who sold musical instruments as well as wallpaper, paint, and home furnishings, operated a store at this site by 1867. He replaced it with the above pictured building in 1901. Bassi's civic contributions included forming the German Liederkranz Society, a male choral group, in 1856, well before the Civil War. In 1909 Frank Heidt acquired a German newspaper, the Wrecker, and also published the Rundschau at 233 W. Cook, as shown in the close-up on the left. The Wrecker was established in 1874 by Gustave A. Selback to serve Portage's large German population. In addition to the German newspapers, Heidt also sold wallpaper. Julius Schnell took over the German newspapers in about 1920, but not the wallpaper. Remodeled with carrara glass in the 1930s and 1940s, the building's remaining original feature is the corbeling visible along the base of the parapet and is shown in the drawing above.

**2.** 207 West Cook Street, Raulf Hotel



circa 1927

A hotel has stood at this intersection since 1855. The Ellsworth House received a substantial wing in 1865 and became the Corning House. It burned in 1901, was rebuilt, and finally demolished in 1926. The Raulf Realty Company of Milwaukee constructed the hotel that currently stands here in 1928. The Raulf Hotel contained spaces for eight businesses and offices on the first floor; banquet and meeting rooms, a dining room and tavern on the second floor, a bowling alley in the basement; and 100 hotel rooms and seven apartments on the upper floors. One of many which have stood in Portage, this hotel accommodated the many travelers who came to this busy commercial center. Built in a simple style, the five story red brick building dominates the streetscape.



**4.**  
210 West Cook Street

Wisconsin State Register, Breese & Loomis Co., A.J. Rebolz Clothing

The brick panel under the parapet announces the building date, 1876, and political sentiments of its eccentric first owner, N.H. Wood. Wood operated as a general merchant in Portage starting in 1850 and retired in 1869. His former partners, Loomis, Gallett & Breese and Later Breese, Loomis & Co., continued the business in the building to the east, which later burned. After 210 W. Cook was built in 1876 the mercantile store expanded to fill it. Between 1915 and 1944, Adam Jacob Rebolz and his son ran a men's clothing store here. Both these businesses included large merchant tailor departments.

Edited from 1861 to 1878 by one of the city's most prominent citizens, A.J. Turner, the Wisconsin State Register occupied many buildings. The newspaper was located on the second floor of 210 W. Cook from 1885 to 1889 while owned by S.S. Rockwood and B.F. Goodell.



**5.** 238 West Wisconsin St.  
City Bank of Portage



The state chartered the City Bank of Portage in 1874. Prominent citizens such as Llewellyn Breese, Robert B. Wentworth, E.L. Jaeger, Rodney Loomis, W.D. Fox, and Andrew Weir organized the bank. L... Breese remained as its president until 1914. After the Columbia County Bank failed in the 1873 panic, the City Bank moved into its quarters at 238 W. Wisconsin, a building built in 1855.

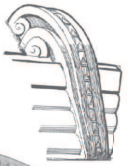
The bank reorganized and rebuilt in 1929, helping to inspire confidence in the local economy after the stock market crash. As Zona Gale recounted, "Standing at the convergence of five streets, the [curving] facade of buff Bedford limestone and St. Cloud granite, set with deep pilasters running to the cornice, with lofty windows...and bronze double doors...will make an impressive entrance to the main business block. Five sons of the original officers [are the current officers]; and all stockholders, excepting two, are residents of Portage."<sup>1</sup> The circular vault door, visible still from the entrance way, weighs over 17 tons. This building remains one of the city's prominent architectural examples of the Art Deco style. The exterior facade and interior construction were completed by the St. Louis Bank Building & Construction Co. in May, 1930. Interior reconstruction and exterior renovation was done in the late 50s and early 60s.

<sup>1</sup> Gale, Zona; Register-Democrat, Nov. 8, 1929.

**6.**  
228 West Wisconsin Street  
Ender House

Henry Emder, an hotel operator in Portage since 1859, established the Ender House in his new, three story building in 1870. The early section to the north may enclose an older frame hotel. The section to the south was built in 1885. The hotel included sleeping rooms on the second and third floors and a saloon, offices, dining room, kitchen, and game rooms on the main floor. Salesmen traveling to Portage displayed their wares in the sample rooms. Emder later expanded his hotel rooms into the second floor of the D. Buglass Bakery building (224 W. Wisconsin) erected in 1886-89. A second floor balcony connected the two.\* Emder sold the hotel to J.H. Wells and others in 1891. It closed in 1929. What remains of its original decorative architecture is the corbeling along its roof line and its window lintels, shown in the drawing above. They hint at the detailing which identified it as an elegant hotel.

\* For additional information see "Intensive Historical Architectural & Historical Survey of the City of Portage", by Joyce McKay, 1993.



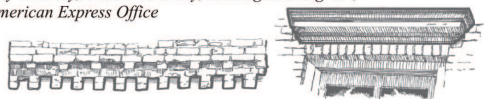
**7. 136 West Cook Street**  
*Wm. Bard & Co., jewelry; Carl R. Michel, jeweler;*  
*Edward Memhard, photographer*



The Michel building housed jewelry businesses for a long period from its construction in 1869-70 until 1955. William Bard & Co., manufacturer and retailer of jewelry and watches, probably occupied the building immediately after its construction. By 1889, the store also sold musical instruments. Carl R. Michel located his jewelry business in the building by 1908, and by 1949, it had become Quinn's Jewelry. It should be noted that the prominent local photographer Edward L. Memhard had his studio on the second floor of the building in 1910. Designed in the Italianate Commercial Style as its remaining cast iron window hoods and parapet suggest, this building stands at a visually pivotal intersection in the downtown.



**137-139 West Cook Street**  
*City Brewery, Haertel Brewery, Eulberg Brewing Co.,*  
*American Express Office*



Carl Haertel, a German native, erected his City Brewery behind this remaining building in 1851-52. Built in 1866-1867, the section facing Cook St. contained the brewery's beer hall and office. Haertel also erected 135 W. Cook St. in 1866-67 as his residence;<sup>1</sup> and for investment purposes in 1869-73, erected 131-133 W. Cook after this photo was taken. Because beer traveled poorly, breweries were in many cities and sold their products in their beer halls and local saloons. By 1870, Haertel produced 3000 barrels of lager beer annually. Jacob Best, Jr., of Milwaukee's Empire Brewery and Haertel's son-in-law, managed the brewery from 1876 until 1884. Peter and Adam Eulberg, also German natives, and their heirs ran the brewery from 1884-1944 as the Eulberg Brewing Co. The brewery closed in 1958. The Haertel Block which became the Eulberg Block in 1884 housed the American Express Office at 139 from 1867 through 1894, followed by a grocery until 1955. Fraternal lodges met in the hall on the third floor which until recently extended across all four buildings from 137-139 on the corner to include 135 W. Cook

1. Photograph identification, Portage Library Historical Collection.  
 2. Bennett, D., interview, 1995.



Photo digitally restored by Judy Crook, JC Designs

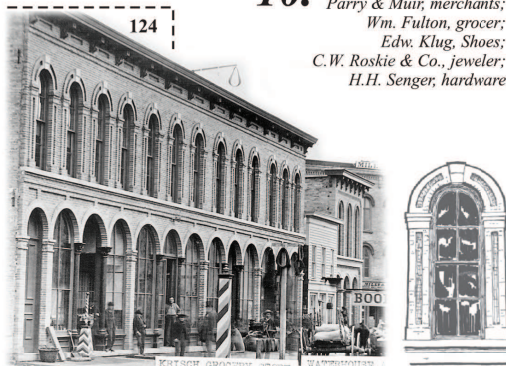


**9. 131-133 & 135 West Cook Street**  
*Ph. Goodman firm;*  
*Buckley & Leisch, merchant tailors*

Phillip H. Goodman, born in Bavaria, had his shop at two other sites in the downtown before locating here. In 1875, when across the street in the Pettibone Block at DeWitt & Cook, his firm produced custom made clothing as well as accessories and "buckskin underclothing" for cold weather. In 1887, while located next door at 135, Maurice Goodman, J.A. Carroll & C.C. Buckley employed about 50 tailors. By 1894 the company was located at 131 West Cook, as well as 135, as shown in the photo above. By 1895 the firm became Buckley & Leisch, the largest merchant tailors in Portage and much of Wisconsin outside of Milwaukee. By 1910 Buckley & Leisch, still at 131 W. Cook, were joined by Otto Kirsch. The firm remained there through 1921.

The building housed lawyer H.B. Rogers in the 1920s-1930s and the Portage Mortgage & Loan Co. from 1908-1917. Operating a large salting station in the First Ward, the H.J. Heinz Co. placed its offices here in 1917. By 1923, Portage became Heinz's main branch office.

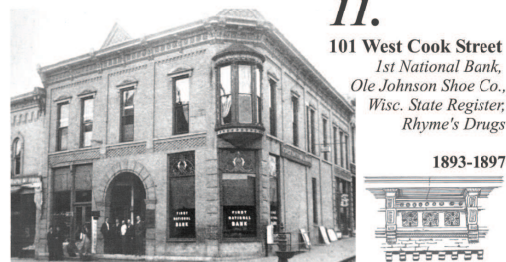
**10. 124 West Cook Street**  
*Parry & Muir, merchants;*  
*Wm. Fulton, grocer;*  
*Edw. Klug, Shoes;*  
*C.W. Roskie & Co., jeweler;*  
*H.H. Senger, hardware*



Conrad Collipp, a brick manufacturer, constructed this building in 1869. Each of the property owners in the block agreed to have the facades built alike. Collipp completed the building and an extension in Sept. 1875 to accommodate renters Wm. T. Parry and David G. Muir.<sup>1</sup> They remained there until 1892, see pg. 2. Originally founded as Bebb & Parry in 1856, the company dealt in staple and fancy dry goods, notions, shoes, and hats. Naturalist John Muir described his travels to the townfolk at his brother's store when he visited in Portage in 1885.<sup>2</sup>

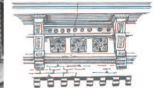
Between about 1910 and 1920, Wm. Fulton sold staple and fancy groceries at this address and Edward Klug ran a cobbler shop perhaps by 1904 until about 1921. Succeeding businesses were Port's Groceries until 1928; Mehne Bros.; Treckey's; and from 1955 through the late 1970s Atkinson's.<sup>3</sup> The detailing along the windows and remains of the parapet reflect the influence of the Italianate Commercial style. The window lintel in the line drawing beneath was the most prominent remaining feature in this whole block of buildings. 124 burned in 1994.

1. Turner, A.J.; Wisconsin State Jnl, Sept 25, 1875, pg. 2, col. 1.  
 2. Stanley, M.; The Heart of John Muir's World, 1995, pg. 210.  
 3. Port, F. & M., Atkinson, L.; interviews, 1995.



**11. 101 West Cook Street**  
*1st National Bank,*  
*Ole Johnson Shoe Co.,*  
*Wisc. State Register;*  
*Rhyme's Drugs*

1893-1897



Chartered in 1890, the First National Bank moved in when the J.A. Johnson estate erected the building in 1893. As a federal bank, it served as a depository for the county and city. The bank moved across the street in 1907 to 102 W. Cook which was demolished in 1994. When owned by Maurice Goodman's Register Printer Co., the recently expanded Wisconsin State Register relocated to the second floor of 101 in 1894 and published the weekly State Register, the Portage Daily Register (begun in 1886), and operated a binding factory here. The Johnson Shoe Co. was here prior to 1910, and was followed by Gus Salem's craft shop in 1912. Established as a druggist in 1886, Frank A. Rhyme located here in 1914. He soon remodeled the exterior and the first floor and added a soda fountain. Wm. Rhyme took over in 1919, and Frank Rhyme in 1950. This venerable Drug Co. remained at this corner until 1978 when it moved to 117 E. Cook. The cornice and window details belong to the Italianate Commercial style, but some of the brick work and the arch in the photo above are Queen Anne.

**12. 201 DeWitt St**  
*C.F. Mohr Lumb*



In 1888, partners Prentice & Mohr purchased part of an existing lumber-yard along the canal's north bank. They dealt in lumber, sash, blinds, doors, wall paper, salt, cement, coal and lime. C.F. Mohr located his lumber office in a new building at 201 DeWitt in 1899-1900. He reorganized his company with Samuel Stotzer, stonecutter, in 1901. The Mohr-Stotzer Lumber Company then maintained mills at Holt, Wisconsin and a main floor office in Wausau. The company advertised as a manufacturer of pine, hemlock, and hardwood lumber. Barker Lumber & Fuel Co. followed by the York-Barker Lumber Co. ran the yard after 1937.

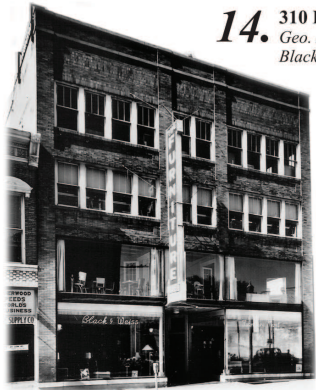
Much unchanged except for its cornice, it was never an ornate building. The original store front displays cast iron pilasters made by the Portage Iron Works and retains its original door and metal step. Patrons paid for their goods through an 8" doorway in the large window facing Edgewater St. while their goods were weighed on the scale that operated on the sidewalk below. The opening in the window is no longer present.

**13. 211 DeWitt Street**  
*Wood & Smith, flour and feed*

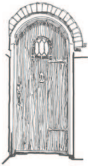


Flour and feed dealers G.D. Wood & J.W. Smith occupied this building after its construction in 1898-99 until 1905. In business since 1896, Charles Giesler moved his cigar factory into the building by 1910 and probably remained until the early 1920s. Although tobacco was raised in turn-of-the-century Columbia County, cigar factories located their small shops more because of the potential market than available supply of tobacco. These shops that preceded mass production often required little space and a low investment in equipment. By 1924, the Jowett paint store replaced the cigar shop.

Little of the building's Italianate Commercial details have changed: cast iron cornice, oriel window, and original store front with cast iron pilasters by the Portage Iron Works, all remain.



**14.** 310 DeWitt Street  
Geo. Murison, Cabinetmaker;  
Black's Furniture Mart

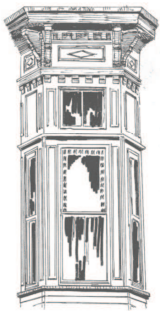


George Murison and his brother established a cabinet making shop in 1853. The Murison Bldg. was constructed in 1883 and the north wing added in 1892, both by well known local contractor, Andrew Carnegie; and bricklayer John Dalton.<sup>1</sup> Murison crafted most of his own furniture, retailed it, and ran an undertaking business for which he supplied coffins. When Wallace joined him in 1893, the business became Murison & Son Co. By 1900, Murison retailed but no longer produced furniture and shifted his undertaking business to funeral management. The fire drawing of the ornate doorway above is the alley entrance to the former funeral parlor and is the last feature from the 1883-92 construction.

After Murison's death in 1914, his sons, Wallace and George A., operated the store, adding the glass front and third floor in 1917. Saul Black and Jack Weiss purchased the business and ran Black's Furniture Mart between 1950 and 1983. Otto Pflanz, a former employee, bought the funeral service in 1946.

1. Turner, A. J., *Wisconsin State Register*, Jan. 5, 1884, pg. 3, col. 4.

**15.** 320 DeWitt Street *Hillyer Block, High Priced Grocery, Whalen's Café, Zimmerman's Plumbing*



The construction of the Hillyer Block was undertaken by D.A. Hillyer in 1889. P.H. Shaver who sold staple and fancy goods, located his High Priced grocery here in 1890. In 1901, he sold the grocery to Herbert Slowey, his clerk. Operating as the White Market, Slowey remained at 320 DeWitt until 1920. A grocery remained here for part of the 1920s, but Whalen's Café was here by 1929 and Zimmerman's Plumbing from 1937 through 1955. This building is an excellent example of the Italianate Commercial style with its wood cornice and brackets, projecting oriel windows, window embellishments, cast iron columns at the angled entrance, and intact display windows.

**16.** 309 DeWitt Street  
*Wisconsin State Register*



Photo digitally restored by Judy Crook, JC Designs

The Wisconsin State Register occupied many buildings and had many owners prior to its permanent location at 309 DeWitt. A.J. Turner and S.S. Brannan began its publication from a strongly Republican perspective in 1861 from offices in the Pettibone building located at the southwest corner of W. Cook & DeWitt, which later burned.

Their politics were Abolitionist, and supported Mr. Lincoln in the Civil War. From 1871-73 Turner & Brannan published their paper at the corner of Canal & DeWitt.<sup>1</sup> A.J. Turner's son, who became one of America's most prominent historians, Frederick Jackson Turner, recalled having "spent my youth in a newspaper office in contact with practical politics...where as local editor, my father reported the community life which I helped to 'set up'..."<sup>2</sup> Subsequent owners, S.S. Rockwood & Goodell moved the paper to the City Bank Bldg. at the corner of Cook & Wisconsin.<sup>3</sup> They published the Wisconsin State Register weekly and in 1886 published the Portage Daily Register as a daily. A.A. Porter purchased both papers, served as the editor, and located the business at the new Register Building in 1908, as seen in the photos above and below. Except for three years, Porter owned the paper until 1942 when he sold it to the Comstock Publishing Co. Max Lavine purchased the paper in 1957 and later his son John continued its publication.

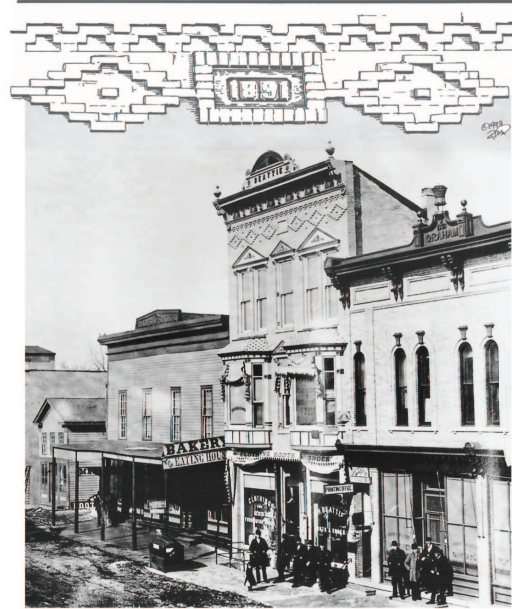
The dry goods firm of Moran & Arthur and law offices of Ross Bennett and Bogue & Sanderson also occupied the building. The Ionic pilasters supporting the elliptical arches below the triangular pediment identify it with the Period Revival Commercial style. It was remodeled in 1956.

1. Turner, A. J., *Wisconsin State Jml.*, Sept., 1873, pg. 3, col. 1.  
2. Turner, F. J., 1922 letter to C.L. Skinner, *Wisc. Mag. of Hist.*; 1935, Vol XIX (1):91-103.  
3. Clark & Goodell, *Wisc. State Register*, 1885, address in headline.



circa 1910

**17.** 305 DeWitt Street  
*Wm. Beattie, boots & shoes*



The shop of William Beattie, who employed four additional craftsmen, produced and sold custom-made boots and shoes at this site from 1875. He occupied this building after it was built in 1891 until 1900. Between 1900 and 1920, Peter McDermott ran his saloon known as The Club at 305 DeWitt. Beattie Hall was used as a dance hall and the lodge hall of the Knights of Maccabee after 1910. As an elaborate example of the Italianate Commercial style, the building displays a cast iron cornice and window hoods, brickwork, protruding oriel windows, and original store front with cast iron pilasters and recessed door.

**William Beattie,**

Manufacturer and dealer in

**Boots & Shoes, Leather**

AND FINDINGS.

Always in stock a complete assortment of Ladies' and Gentlemen's Fine Boots and Shoes.

Special attention given to **CUSTOM WORK.**  
In no case do we allow work to leave our hands unless satisfactory.

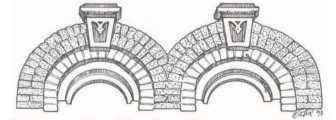
**Esquimaux Lined Rubber Boots.**

All other boots are lined with Felt lining on account of small cost. The Esquimaux is made of the very best rubber and plenty of it, and will outwear any other boot in the market. Do not neglect to see the new boots. In stock all other kinds of rubber goods.

New store in Beattie's Block, directly above John Graham's, toward the Court House, DeWitt st., Portage, Wis.

1875. Christmas. 1875

**18.** 301 DeWitt Street  
*John A. Graham's Drug Company; Wm. Meacher, physician*



1873-1890

John Graham began his retail and wholesale drugstore in 1867 and completed this building in 1873. George Schackell did the masonry work, the bricks came from Collipp's and Armstrong's, and the iron trusses and heavy iron columns that can still be seen on the first floor were cast in the Portage Iron Works at 105 E. Mullett, (in the Industrial Waterfront Historical District).<sup>1</sup> As most druggists, Graham prepared his own medicines and sold paints, varnishes, wallpaper, stationary, books, glassware, engravings, and steamship tickets. A wide and sometimes unlikely range of goods was not uncommon, as it permitted merchants to hedge against poor times. The store later included an elaborate marble soda fountain whose carbonator remained in the basement until 1992. In 1916, John A. Graham, Jr. ran his father's company and was succeeded by Jake Stegman and Byron Taylor. They were in turn succeeded in 1962 by Clinton Daugherty and B.Y. Taylor. Graham's business operated at one site for 119 years, from 1873 to 1992 when Clint Daugherty retired. It is believed to have been one of the oldest continuously operating pharmacies under the same name and location in the state.

Raised in Marcellon, Dr. William Meacher graduated from Rush Medical College, now the University of Chicago, in 1862. As an Asst. Surgeon for the Wisconsin 16th Infantry in the Civil War, he was at the siege of Atlanta and accompanied Sherman in the march to the sea.<sup>2</sup> He returned to practice in Portage from 1870 onward and by 1875 had his office and surgery upstairs above Graham's along with three other physicians, a dentist and a veterinarian.<sup>3</sup> Drs. William Taylor & Byron Meacher continued the practice and were succeeded by Stewart Taylor Sr. This group maintained a continuous medical practice on the second floor for over 80 years, when in 1957 they moved across Cook Street. Many of the early medical pieces are now at the Surgeons Quarters; the large circular skylight that lit the operating room was still in place in 1992. The Italianate Commercial style building retains much of its parapet, window surrounds with keystone, and canted entry.

1. Turner, A. J., *Wisconsin State Register*, March 29-April 12, 1873, pg. 3, col. 1.  
2. Jones, J.E., *History of Columbia County*, Vol. II, 1914, pg. 737.  
3. Graham, John, *Graham's Christmas Carols*, Dec., 1875, pg. 2, col. 1.

**Graham's Christmas Carols**

Portage, Wis., : : : : Dec., 1875.

**Physicians and Surgeons.**

Orders left for the attention of the following Physicians and Surgeons will be promptly attended to:

- Dr. JAMES FRENCH; Office in Graham's Drug Store.
- Dr. WM. MEACHER; Office over Graham's Drug Store.
- Dr. OTTO POLPHEGGER; Office over Graham's Drug Store.
- Dr. P. H. CONAN; Office over Graham's Drug Store.
- Dr. A. C. KELLOGG; Office over Corning's Hardware Store.
- Dr. E. C. HAYES, Homeopaths; Office on DeWitt street.
- Dr. W. H. C. ABELL, Dentist; Office over Graham's Store.
- Dr. L. M. ALLEN, Veterinary Surgeon; Office over Graham's.

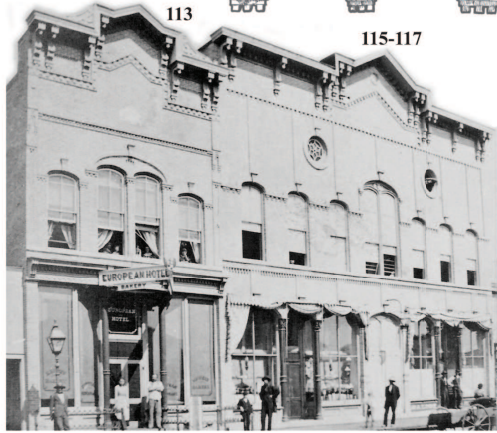
**GRAHAM'S BLACK OIL!**

For the cure of Sprains, Rheumatism, Bruises and Sores; weakness of the Knee Joints, Cramps, Frost Bites, Old Sores, Chillsains, Contractions of the Muscles, &c.

It is well known and has been on sale many years. It seldom fails to afford instant relief. FOR HORSES AND CATTLE, it proves valuable in cases of Flesh Wounds, Galls, Sulf Joints, Sprain, in its curable stage, Rheumatism, Swelling, Scalds or Grease, Fall Evil, Cracked Hoofs, Horn Distemper, Wounds, &c.  
—Price, 25 Cents.

19.

113 E. Cook Street  
Huber's Bakery, European Hotel

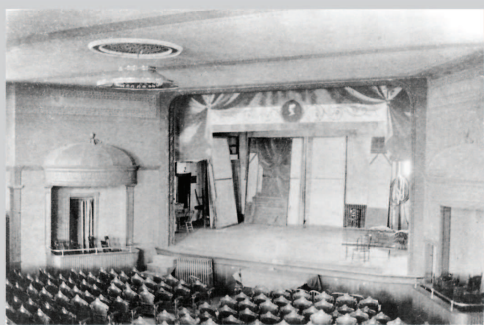


Michael Huber engaged in the bakery business at this site by 1856. The building housing his hotel, eating house, and bakery was erected here in 1879. Unlike the Emdor House, his European Hotel, operating until about 1903-14, simply meant rented rooms on its second floor. Between about 1908 to at least 1912, Huber ran a bowling alley rather than a bakery. After 1917 until 1929, it's use remains unclear. It again served as a bakery under different owners after 1929, and yet again in 1991. Note the decorative brick and iron work of the Italianate Commercial style along the parapet, building corners, and upper floor windows.

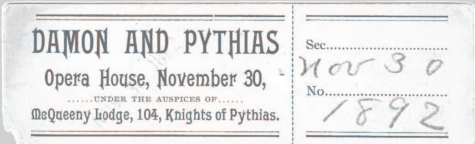
20.

115-117 E. Cook Street  
Dullaghan's Opera House

John Dullaghan financed the building of the two story, cream brick, elaborately detailed, Italianate Commercial business block in 1879, see photo above. The marble cornice was made and put into place personally by Samuel Stotzer of the Stotzer Marble & Granite Works.<sup>1</sup> It once housed all at the same time, a bar in the basement, a double retail space on the first floor and an opera hall on the second.<sup>2</sup> Such opera halls were relatively common to 19th century communities. This hall seated 350 guests and included a stage and orchestra pit as shown on the right. The hall featured performances by traveling artists including musicals, drama, slapstick comedy, minstrel shows, and lectures. Performances were announced by parades along Cook St. The Hatfield Company ran the Opera House between 1886 and 1901. The Eulberg Brewing Co. took over its management from 1915 to 1929 when movies gained popularity. Montgomery Wards had the local firm of Gunderson Construction demolish and rebuild this building in 1929, so that only the original side walls remain today.<sup>3</sup> Rhyme's Drugs, founded over a century ago in 1886, moved here in 1978.

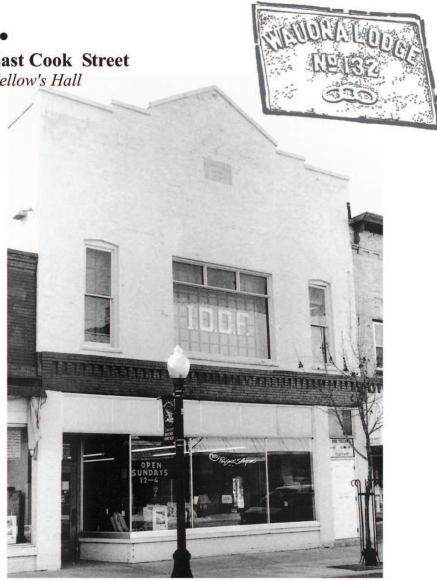


1. Turner, A.J.; Wisconsin State Register, Sept., 1879, pg. 3, col. 1.  
2. Turner, A.J.; ibid.  
3. Gunderson, L.; interview, 1995.



21.

124 East Cook Street  
Odd Fellow's Hall



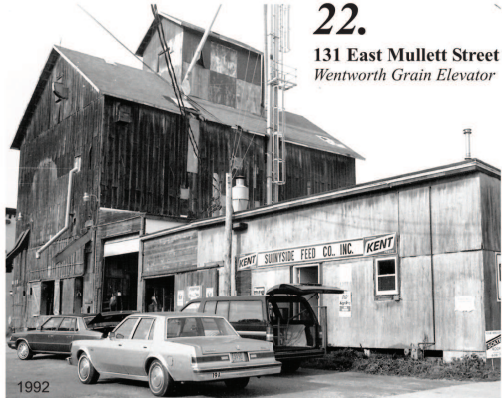
In 1916, the Odd Fellows purchased 124 East Cook and replaced the building. The new, second floor lodge hall included a club room, kitchen, dining room, and main hall. First founded as a predominately German lodge in 1856, the Portage Lodge of Odd Fellows reorganized in 1867 and incorporated German members in 1868. Other city organizations also used the hall. The Odd Fellows rented the street level as a retail space. It housed the farm implement dealership of Henry A. Schultz by 1918 until about 1925; the Schaefer & Meyer Hardware by 1929; and the Portage Super Creamed Ice Cream store by 1937 through 1955.



**Industrial Waterfront Historic District**

22.

131 East Mullett Street  
Wentworth Grain Elevator



The timber frame grain elevator standing along the canal was constructed for Robert B. Wentworth, grain dealer, just after the Civil War started in 1862. It possessed a storage capacity of 4000 bushels of grain. Wentworth also owned the Portage & Green Bay Transportation Co. which moved grain by steamboat from Portage to Green Bay between 1864 and 1874, as pictured in the photo below. His adjacent warehouses also stored coal, seed, and lumber. Irving W. York purchased the feed mill in 1890 and erected the adjacent warehouse in circa 1927. He ran a separate flour mill and warehouse in north Portage. Sunnyside Hatcheries acquired the mill in 1946, Vita Plus in 1979, and Terry Raimer in 1989. It retained the name "Sunnyside" from 1946, through the 1990's.

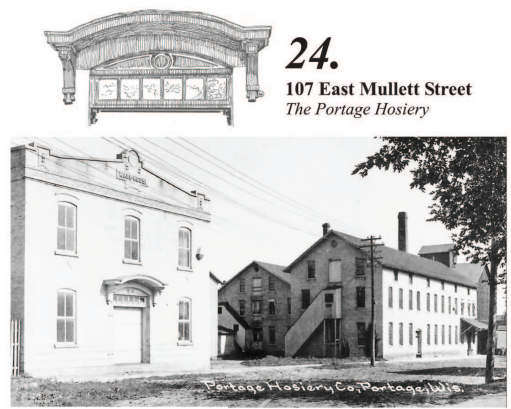


23.

Mullett Street Railroad Sidings

By 1873 the Milwaukee & St. Paul Railroad provided a series of industrial spurs that paralleled the canal in the first ward. As can be seen on the map on page 13, the tracks ran along Mullett St. and angled over to where the local foundry had been located. The products of mid-sized industries could reach more distant markets through the railroad, especially the Portage Iron Works at 105 E. Mullett that manufactured cast iron columns and capitals for the state capitol building.<sup>1</sup> It also permitted raw materials to reach Portage more rapidly. Newsprint for the Portage Daily Register is shown being unloaded to the right. Vita Plus had much of this siding removed in 1979,<sup>2</sup> all the way back to the remaining spur at H. Samuels scrap metal facility.

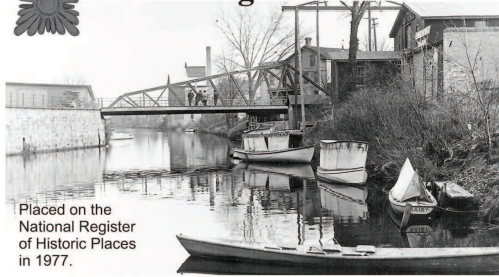
1. Wisconsin State Register; 1879; pg. 2, Col. 3.  
2. Raimer, Terry; interview, 1995.



Prominent Portage businessmen including R.B. Wentworth and partners Loomis, Gallet, & Breese organized the Portage Hosiery Company in 1878. In 1881 or '82, the company relocated from DeWitt & Cook to the new "factory building" in the current complex. During its first two decades, the hosiery manufactured yarn, heavy wool socks for lumbermen, leggings, and mittens. The plant began modest expansion in the late 1890s when it employed 110 workers and ran several branch factories. The company added the office and shipping building in 1891; the yarn spinning building in 1903-1904; the warehouse in 1918, the tile office building and mill with the knitting machines in 1936; and the west addition in 1952. The mill eventually produced mittens, boot socks, fine hosiery, and slipper socks. The Breese family owned it until the mid 1940s, when the above picture of the workers was taken. The mill was one of the city's major employers for almost 90 years. At its original site now for almost 120 years, and under new ownership, The Portage Woolen Mills may again be occupied.



# The Portage Canal



Placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1977.

At high water, the Wisconsin River seasonally flowed across The Portage, now the city's first Ward, into the Fox which sits eight feet lower than the Wisconsin. This seasonal frequency of a navigable channel between the rivers gave rise to the first formal attempt on paper to create a permanent waterway in 1829. In 1839, the U.S. War Dept. sent Capt. J.T. Cram to determine where locks and dams should be located and to estimate the engineering costs of a continuous waterway between the Mississippi and Lake Michigan. First steps required a canal at The Portage and dams with locks along the Upper Fox River to break the 39 foot drop between Portage and Lake Winnebago. A previous attempt at a canal in 1835 was made parallel to what is now Wauona Trail, a National Register Site. This is also where Capt. Cram's 1839 engineering records placed it. The canal was dug at its current location initially from 1849-51. It functioned successfully for shallow draft steamboats and barges from the 1850s onward. "Before 1876 [when the canal was dredged and rebuilt] there was just a tow path. They used to pull boats through the canal with a team of horses. There was a driveway close to the [south] side of the canal. Our house was close to the canal and there was just road enough so a team could go through there."<sup>3</sup> After the Civil War the franchise was transferred to the Federal Government. It was then improved by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in 1874 & '76 to accommodate deeper draft steam boats. It was later discovered that the faster steamboats with deep drafts could not navigate the Wisconsin River to reach the canal. The Army Corps built a series of wing dams in the Wisconsin to create the needed navigation channel, only to find they rapidly silted over thus defeating navigation by 1886 along the Wisconsin River. However, the canal operated successfully for another 60 years.

The Canal was at its peak for recreational boat traffic in 1908 with 2,461 lockages at the Fort Winnebago Lock, going into the Fox, and 127 lockages at the Portage Lock opening to the Wisconsin. By 1950, Ft. Winnebago lockages had dwindled to 31, with 8 at the Portage Lock. The Upper Fox System was closed to commercial navigation in 1951 and recreational boating continued at a much reduced level.<sup>4</sup> After a century of operation The Canal was victim not only to devastating floods but to the success of the railroads and unavailability of the Wisconsin with its shifting sands.

1. & 2. Meindl, Wm.; *Upper Fox River Intensive Architectural/Historical Survey*, Wisc. SHS, 1991, pp 19-27.

3. Schultz, Louis F.; *Statement of His Life and Work in Portage*, given Oct. 29, 1941 to H.B. Rogers. SHS Archives, Madison (SC1959).

4. McKay, J.; *Intensive Architectural/Historical Survey of Portage*, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1993, pp 51-58.



## 25. The Portage Lock

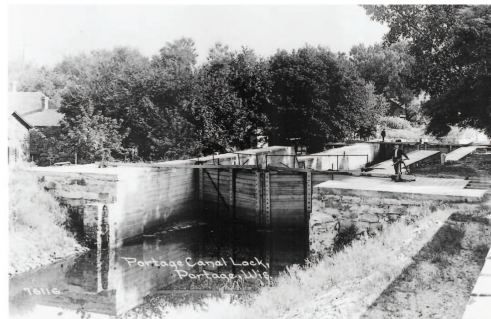
This lock, also called the Wisconsin River Lock No. 1, the first of the Upper Fox Locks, was constructed in 1851 by the State. It was originally a guard lock, built to hold back sand and debris and was the only one of its type in the Fox system. The lock was lengthened to a total of 160 feet by 35 ft. in 1873.<sup>1</sup> The Army Corps repaired the lock in 1876 and '77 enabling boats drawing 3 feet to navigate the lock channel. The wooden lock elements can be seen in the 1882 map of the city reproduced in part above.<sup>2</sup>

1. Annual Report of Chief of Engineers, 1872, pg 34, 55.

2. Excerpted from: J.J. Stoner (publ.); 1882, Bird's Eye View of Portage.



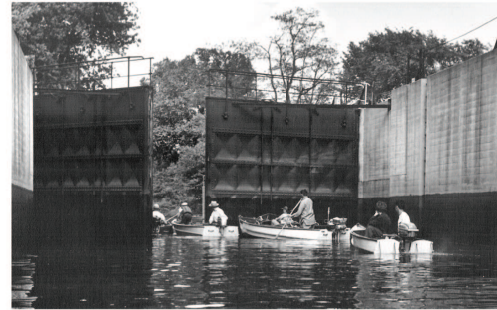
The U.S. Army Corps rebuilt the lock in 1892-93 as a lift lock at a slightly different site (the site of the current lock). The walls were dry-stone masonry. In 1901-02 the Corps renovated the lock, raising it 3½ feet. It is not known which of these construction projects on the Portage Lock is shown in the above photo.



The U.S. steam tug Fox is shown below with her crew in the 1800s heading up the canal to the Portage Lock to access the Wisconsin River. Headquartered in Berlin, the tug worked the Fox and Wisconsin and canal. When at work in midstream the dowser pole, placed vertically on the front of the main deck, could be ratcheted up to the position shown when work requiring a stationary position was completed.<sup>1</sup> In 1890 the first Fox, shown below, was rebuilt into the steamer Albatross.



Between 1927-28 the lock gained its currently visible concrete walls and steel gates. The lockage reports for the 20 years preceding 1928 show the Portage Lock was the least used on the whole Fox River system. In the early 1950s the lock gates were welded shut and it reverted to its original function as a guard lock. The Army Corps formally quit claimed the canal and both its locks to the State in 1962.<sup>2</sup>



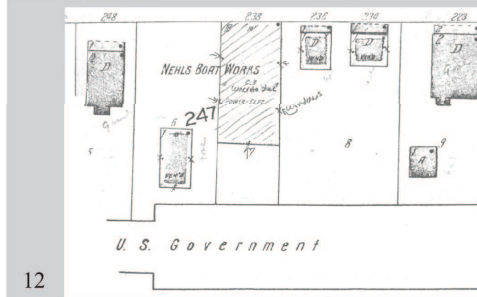
In the early 1950s members of the Portage Boat Club took their boats through the lock. This celebratory passage was the last time the lock was opened before the gates were welded shut.<sup>3</sup>

In December of 1993 the threat to the city of flooding from high ice filled waters made the State aware that the lock was no longer stable. A temporary dike to protect the lock was ordered by the DNR and constructed by the city.

1. Mitchell, D.C. *Steamboats on The Fox River*, 1986, pg. 90.

2. McKay, J.; *Intensive Architectural/Historical Survey of Portage*, SHS, 1993; pp 51-58.

3. Galley, F.; interview, 1995.



## 26. 242 West Edgewater Street N.H. Wood's Hay Press Barn, 1877; Nehls Boat Works, 1922



**Nehls' Boat Works & The Recreational Boat Trade...** In Sept. 14, 1922 Wm. H. Nehls purchased lots 6 & 7, and in 1923 completed the 2-level 300 sq. ft. concrete clock building currently on Lot 7, and established the Nehls Boat Works there. In 1925 Nehls' Boat Works employed ten individuals and their 2 largest boats that year were each over 51 feet long. They were produced for the Riverview Boat Line in Wisconsin Dells and the largest held 60 passengers. They each had nickel trim throughout and each had a 70hp Kermath engine for cruising at 12mph. Nehls Boat Works also produced 18 rowboats for Lake Mason that year, numerous speedboats for customers as far away as Galveston Texas and shipped many of their boats to Evinrude in Milwaukee. In 1928 they produced 2 more 45 ft. passenger boats for the Dells tourist trade.<sup>1</sup> "With his 3 sons working with him they would deliver by water boats for the Lower Dells in the Spring when the river was up, and trailered the ones for the Upper Dells."<sup>2</sup>

By 1929 the U.S. Army Corps. of Engineers completed one of Wisconsin's largest public works projects installing the currently visible concrete walls and steel gates at the Portage Lock within 150ft. of the boat works. Nehls' business thrived on a paved street of which Portage had 18 miles of brick, concrete and gravel roadways, protected by 2 motorized and 2 horse drawn Fire Dept. vehicles in 1929. Between 1930-31 Nehls built the brick building currently on lot 6 and faced the fronts of both structures with cream brick making these commercial vernacular buildings appear much as they do today. During subsequent years the company shifted focus and reformed as the Nehls Boat & Furnace Works. In 1951 the Upper Fox System was finally closed to commercial navigation. Lots 6 & 7 were held by the Nehls family for 52 years until 1972, and their business history parallels the decline of Portage's recreational boat trade.

1. Portage Register-Democrat 4-1-25; 7-19-25; 12-23-28.

2. Curtis, Dr. C.R.; Oral History, 2004.

**Land speculation at the Portage...** Lots 6 & 7 at 242 W. Edgewater St., were originally landlocked and in a lightly wooded area of Menominee Indian lands in the Michigan Territories of the 1820s. Their legal history through 1852 reveals that the U.S. Government acted with questionable legality according to Attorney General Bronson La Follett's office on not one but two occasions.<sup>1,2</sup> In 1832, the as yet undefined lots 6 & 7 were among lands legally belonging to Native Americans and transiently inhabited by the Ho-Chunk since the early 1700s. The lands were granted by U.S. Patent to Indian Agent Augustin Grignon (and John Ecuyer's heirs). These 648 acres between the Fox and Wisconsin rivers known as Grignon's Tract, or Claim #21, were conveyed requiring only "that some sort of title from the Indians be obtained" before giving away Native American lands bounded to the south by the traditional portage itself, and would eventually encompass the canal at its present site and most of the downtown.<sup>3</sup> This usurpation of Portage's fur trade route, an aggressive incursion onto Ho-Chunk lands, contributed substantially to the outbreak of the Black Hawk Wars 2 years later.

In 1839 the coals of speculation were again fanned, this time by the U.S. War Dept's. engineering survey showing the ideal placement of the canal

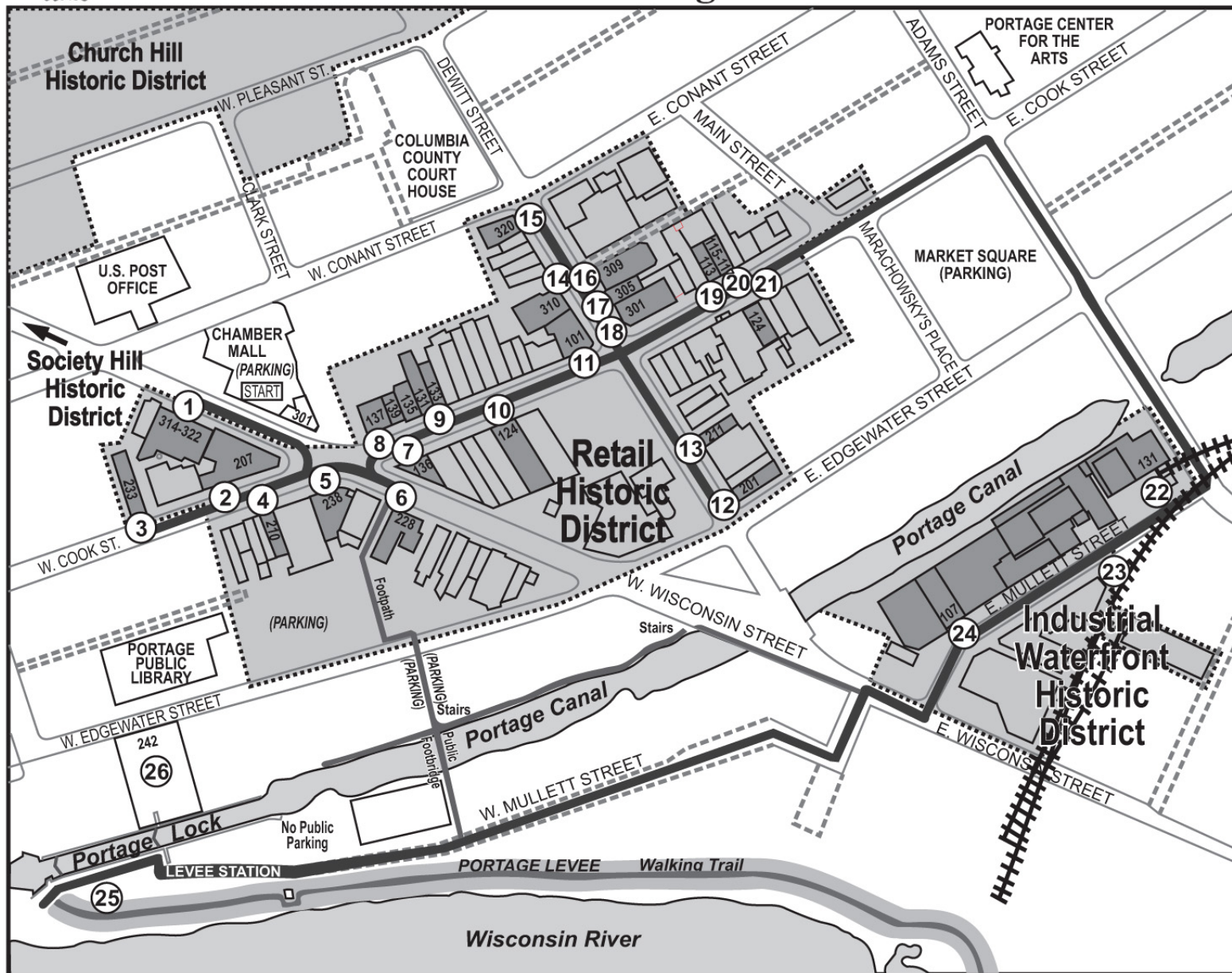
as behind and abutting these soon to be defined lots. "It was evident that everyone in Portage during the period 1849-1854 understood where the canal would be located and that it would be 75 ft. wide... Federal agents at Fort Winnebago allowed Webb & Bronson to plat federal land in 1849..., and no objection was made by any governmental authority as to the platted width... of the canal... by Judge Guppy in 1852 and 1853." These lots were finally identified as numbers 6 & 7 in Guppy's 1852 plat of Portage. However La Follett's legal investigation concluded that "aggressive land speculators... like Guppy secured patents and deeds from the government and recorded their plats [while] state government floundered trying to untangle their fraudulent acts."<sup>3</sup>

The canal, initially excavated as its current site in 1859-61, was limited to shallow draft steam boats. Between the time these lots were platted and the 1874-76 reconstruction of the canal for deeper draft steam vessels, these lots

changed hands 7 times, were mortgaged 6 times, and foreclosed on once. During these 15 years of speculation the land appears to have remained unimproved until N.H. Wood's 2 1/2 story hay press barn was built here possibly as early as 1877. Wood advertised simply but ominously as a "speculator" in 1870, when he was approximately 70.<sup>4</sup> Recalling Portage of the late 1850s through early 70s, Wood found "among folks in Portage, those with an insane desire to mortgage their farms to build railroads and thereby obtain a permanent fortune", an epithet that made Wood a rich man.<sup>5</sup> By 1887 Wood had died, and by 1889 the barn was gone, thus ushering out Portage's clouded eras of speculation.

1. Wisc. Atty. Gen., La Follette's Correspondence 1980, Vol 218:352-57.  
 2. Turner, A.J., The Columbia County Tree, The Grignon Tract, pp 67-70  
 3. Wisconsin Attorney General Op. Cit., pg 355  
 4. Columbia County Directory, 1870, pg. 38.  
 5. Columbia County History, 1880 pp 432-436.

## Downtown & Waterfront Walking Tour



### Map Legend

The tour starts at the Chamber Mall, 301 West Wisconsin, St., shown on the map.

Circled numbers denote order in text and recommended sequence for the tour. Corresponding number plaques are on each building to aid identification. On the map, the three digits inside each building footprint are the street addresses.

Historical photos, when they could be found, show the original appearance of buildings and waterfront. The text describes the buildings' first and subsequent functions. Each is a jewel of versatility and a reflection of generations of businesses that form our local history.

The canal footpath and footbridge are open to the public. The canal footpath has a staircase at each end.

Public parking is available at the Chamber Mall, Market Square, the Portage Library, and near the Canal Footbridge. Public facilities are located at the Chamber Mall.

## FOX-WISCONSIN RIVERS



## HERITAGE CORRIDOR

The Portage Canal and Fox River Locks of 1876 are unique among navigational systems in the U.S. Unlike the Erie Canal, the Fox System was built for steamboats to power themselves through the canal and locks. The canal towpath was destroyed in 1876, and small guide boats were used to steer large steamboats thereafter. The locks on the Fox River system, many of which still operate are one of only two such systems in the nation where gates are manually operated just as they were a century ago.

A GATEWAY to the great forests and prairies of America's interior from the 1630s through the 1830s, the Fox Wisconsin waterway links Lake Michigan with the Mississippi River. Sparked by the successful completion of the Erie Canal in 1825, Wisconsin turned its imagination to connecting its major river routes to improve transportation, and promote settlement and economic development. Commercial navigation of a continental divide once crossed only by canoe became the major effort of the Fox-Wisconsin Improvement Project. The system spanned 250 miles and needed dams with most of the 26 locks on the Fox that broke the river's 207 ft. fall. The waterway's central requirement was a canal with locks at each end at Portage to connect the Fox and Wisconsin. Lastly a series of dams on the wide, sandy and often shallow Wisconsin were needed to reach the Mississippi. The entire waterway, completed in 1876, connected the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico. The waterway had a critical and less well known effect locally. The Portage Canal was in use long before the waterway's completion in 1876. From the Depression of 1857 onward, the canal lessened the local severity of repeated economic crises by providing access to regional markets. In addition the construction of the dams beside the locks provided local water power that drove growth and development of the urban Lower Fox. Many of the Upper Fox communities are those in which improved river navigation and waterpower initiated local industry, and in some cases sustained it, in fact, through the turn of the century.

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### HISTORIC SITES:

- Wauona Trail, pre-1600s
- Surgeon's Quarters, 1819-1824
- Fort Winnebago Cemetery, 1828
- Indian Agency House, 1832
- Henry Merrell House, 1835
- Portage Canal, blt. 1835, 1849-51, 1874, 1876
- Zona Gale House, circa, 1906
- Zona Gale Breese House, 1912

### HISTORICAL MARKERS:

- Marquette & Joliet, 1673
- Pauquette's Ferry, 1828-1836
- Surrender of Red Bird, 1827
- Fort Winnebago, blt. 1828-1832
- Old Military Road, blt. 1835-1838
- Frederick Jackson Turner, 1861-1932
- Ketchum's Point

### RUSTIC ROADS:

**LEVEE ROAD,** starts at Hwy 33 on the west side of Portage and runs along the Caledonia Levee, through the 5000 acre Pine Island Wild Life Area, and passes the Aldo Leopold Reserve in Sauk County.

**AGENCY HOUSE ROAD,** starts at Hwy 33 on the east side of Portage and runs barely a mile with the canal on one side and wetlands of the other. It goes to the Indian Agency House and is part of the Ice Age Trail. The Fort Winnebago Lock Site is located off the dirt track at the end of the road.

