

# The Making of Pepin County

## Opening

- Only 28 counties at Wisconsin's statehood in 1848
- Pepin County part of a massive Chippewa County
- By early 1850s, State Legislature accustomed to creating new counties. Created most counties by 1899, only 2 in 1900s.

## Key dates

**1787 – Wisconsin is made part of the Northwest Territory**

**1836 – Wisconsin Territory formed (the Northwest Territory had divided three times earlier into Indiana, Illinois and Michigan Territories)**

**1845 – Chippewa County created (included the current Pepin and other counties)**

**1848 – Wisconsin became a state on May 29**

**1854 – Dunn County created out of Chippewa (included the current Dunn and Pepin Counties)**

**1858 – Pepin County created out of Dunn**

## William Boyd Newcomb

- The one name directly connected to local efforts to petition the legislature and create Dunn and Pepin

- According the *History of Buffalo and Pepin Counties*, published in 1919:

**“William Boyd Newcomb ... one of the most picturesque characters in the history of Pepin village and county, may, indeed, be called the father of the village ... [He] was born in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, Nov. 24, 1822. ... He acquired a good common school education, and in 1843, having attained his majority, came west to Fort Madison, Iowa, where he engaged in teaching school.**

**... In 1846, he came to Pepin. ... He went to Menomonie, Wis., in 1847 and worked as a lumberman and pilot. On June 19, 1849, he married Hester Foster. ... In 1850, Mr. Newcomb came to Pepin township to live, and in the following year made a claim to the southwest quarter of Section 25, township 23, range 15, and built ... the first house in the village. He always took an interest in public enterprises. At one time he purchased the outfit of Pepin Independent [a local newspaper published 1856-58]. ... He joined the**

**Republican Party soon after its formation and was ever afterward one of its active members in Pepin. Among the various public positions he held were those of justice of the peace, postmaster, township treasurer, county treasurer, and he was the first county recorder.”**

- **Surveyed and platted 40 acres of his land and formed Village of Pepin (earning him the nickname of “The Father of the Village of Pepin” by the *History of Buffalo and Pepin Counties*)**
- **In the mid to late 1850s, Village of Pepin considered the most important port on Lake Pepin**
- **A building boom occurred in North Pepin during its first few years**
- **A description of Pepin, from 1857 in the *North Pepin Independent*:**

**“North Pepin ... is beautifully located on the north bank of Lake Pepin, about two miles above the mouth of the Chippewa River, and the foot of the Lake. It is but a little more than one year since the plot of this village was surveyed and recorded. It now contains a**

**population of nearly six hundred, and is rapidly increasing in population, wealth, and commercial importance.**

**The Village has doubled in population during the last six months, and bids fair to increase in the same ratio for many years to come. It is easily accessible by any of the steamboats running on the upper Mississippi. Choice farms can be obtained in the immediate neighborhood of the village at government price....**

**North Pepin will eventually become the shipping mart for the entire Chippewa Valley; and already commands the trade of a larger region of country than any other village on the Wisconsin side of the Mississippi, between La Crosse and Prescott.**

**Village property, though fast rising in value, is not yet held at an exorbitant rate. The location of the village, near the foot of Lake Pepin, and commanding a view of its southern shore for many miles, which shore is rife with the most imposing**

**and beautiful scenery on the western waters and surrounded by a country rich in its varied resources, is such as to make sure of its finally becoming a wealthy, commercial city. It is now the largest and most important commercial town in Dunn County, and the same on Lake Pepin. The Village of North Pepin and country around offer superior inducements to men of all classes, who desire to secure a home and paying business in the western country.”**

- **Article author was Ulysses B. Shaver**
- **Editor/co-owner of the *North Pepin Independent* (1856-58), the first newspaper in the yet-to-be created Pepin County**
- **Land surveyor and real estate agent**
- **Instrumental in organization of the Pepin County Board of Supervisors (first county clerk, acting chair of the first annual meeting of the Pepin County Board)**

## **Dunn County forms out of Chippewa County (1854)**

- Chippewa County seat (Chippewa Falls) 50 miles to the north of North Pepin; residents likely dissatisfied with inconvenience of distant services
- Jan 21, 1854: Newcomb and others submit petition to create Dunn County out of southern Chippewa County
- Feb 3, 1854: Bill readily approved by State Legislature and Governor (13 days)
- Legislature named Dunnville the county seat and called for officer elections to be held Nov 1854
- New county was 24 miles east-to-west, 54 miles north-to-south, southwestern border at the Mississippi River

## **Dunn County organizational struggles**

- 5 county officers elected Nov 1854, including:
  - Register of Deeds William Cady
  - Sheriff Willard Holbrook (played key role later in Pepin County's first organizational meeting)
- Six months later, a vacancy in office of Register of Deeds. From the *History of Dunn County*:

**“An old appointment book ... shows William B. Newcomb of North Pepin was appointed register of deeds for Dunn County on May 3, 1855. ... The appointment of Mr. Newcomb presupposes a vacancy in the office of register of deeds. ... It is possible that William Cady, elected register of deeds in November of 1854, did not qualify as such officer.”**

- Due to these organizational struggles, the State Legislature called for a special election for county officers in Nov 1955, and Samuel B. French was elected Register of Deeds**
- Still quoting from the *History of Dunn County*:**

**“[Newcomb very likely questioned] ... whether an appointee to fill a vacancy held [the office] for the remainder of the full term or only until a successor should be elected at a special election to fill such vacancy.... [Receiving no satisfactory legal ruling] Mr. Newcomb refused to turn the books pertaining to his**

office over to him [French] ... [who] hired a young attorney-at-law, ... to go to North Pepin and get the books. Mr. French stated that the attorney got the books but he was under the impression that they were procured by tact and force rather than by writ and due process of law.”

- **1856: Dunn County considered a single township; 3 people elected in spring as both town supervisors and county supervisors (one of the 3 a neighbor and first cousin of Newcomb)**
- **As county supervisors, in August 1856 they created 7 new townships (the area of what is now Pepin County was formed into Bear Creek and Pepin townships)**
- **1857: Town chairs were elected in April 1857, formed the new county board**

### **Pepin County forms out of Dunn County (1858)**

- **Jan 19, 1858: Bill No. 26S, “A bill to divide the county of Dunn and create the county of Pepin” was introduced to the State Legislature, based on a petition by Newcomb and Pepin businessmen**
- **Senate/Assembly custom: 3 readings before action**

- **Feb 5, 1858: The bill arrived at the Assembly Committee on Town and County Organization but became stalled for more than 2 weeks**
- **At least 2 committee members seriously opposed formation of the new county and demanded to enter their dissenting minority report (describing 4 objections) into the *Journal of the Assembly*. It was read from the floor by one of the dissenters and printed in the journal**

**“MINORITY REPORT:**

**The committee on town and county organization, to whom was referred No. 26 S, a bill providing for the division of Dunn county, Have considered the same; but the undersigned, not being able to agree with a majority in the propriety or justice of a division of Dunn county must dissent therefrom. To justify the position taken by them, ... state the following:**

**1st. That in the division of old and the establishing of new counties. regard should be had to the present and also the future effects that necessarily follow such act. In the matter of convenience of the people, and the amount of taxation to be imposed for the**

**support of county government; taxation should never be made a burden upon any people when it can be avoided. The less area a county has, the more heavily falls taxation upon the inhabitants thereof. No one can fail to see the fact, that the new county proposed to be organized out of a part of Dunn county will be so small, that in a few years taxation must be oppressive.**

**2d. The shape or form of the new county is such as necessarily, at first look, must strike every one of the impropriety of a division; an eye upon the map will speak a loud language.**

**3d. If the convenience of the inhabitants be considered, and division follows as a consequence, it will be seen that a new county should also be established from the north half of Dunn county. Those who inhabit the northern part of the county have much farther to go to the county seat, and therefor greater reason to complain on this score than the inhabitants of Pepin and its vicinity. By the proposed division the equilibrium of justice and convenience is not maintained but destroyed.**

**4th. The people in majority are opposed to the division, so far as can be ascertained from the petitions for and remonstrances against division.”**

- **Several more motions to stall the bill further were defeated in the Assembly**
- **Feb 24, 1858: The bill was returned to the Senate**
- **Feb 25, 1858: The bill was again challenged in the Select Committee of Enrolled Bills, but the challenge failed, and the bill was sent to the Governor, who signed the bill later that day to officially form Pepin County (38-day passage)**

### **Controversy continues**

- **The birth of Pepin County not greeted warmly by everyone back home, specifically residents living in and around the village of Durand, whose strong objections fueled the multiple attempts to stall the bill in the State Legislature**
- **Durand was located just a few miles south of the Dunn County seat at Dunnville, so inconvenience and delivery of services were not at issue.**

- Northern residents felt they had not been adequately consulted about the creation of the new county and grew more upset when they couldn't stop the State Legislature's action

### **Still 1858**

- State Legislature had named Pepin county seat and appointed county officers
  - Ulysses B. Shaver county clerk
- March 15: First organizational meeting of Pepin County
  - Attended by Shaver (clerk & acting chair) and supervisors of Pepin (LC Davis) and Bear Creek (LG Wood) townships – plus a millowner (Willard F. Hollbrook)
  - Meeting held in Shaver's office in Pepin

The first order of business was to select a board chair. Wood nominated Davis, and the two voted unanimously to approve. Davis then took the chair. Wood presented a resolution to divide the Town of Bear Creek to create two additional towns to be known as Lima and Albany and to create two

**additional towns from the Town of Pepin to be known as Waubeek and Frankfort. Following Wood's introduction of the resolution, Willard Holbrook made the motion to accept. However, Chairman Davis refused to recognize Holbrook as a member of the board and chastised him for breaking in and disturbing the proceedings. The motion to adopt was then made by Wood, but the motion failed on a one-to-one tie, with Wood voting in favor and Davis voting against. The meeting then adjourned.**

- Despite apparent defeat, northern citizens began organizing their own townships**
- And continued to voice their objections to the new county. On April 6, 1858, at the second town meeting of the Town of Bear Creek following creation of Pepin County, the Town adopted the following resolution:**

**“Whereas the recent division of Dunn County was brought about by a few town proprietors of the Village of Pepin, by unfair means and through selfish**

**motives, and without consulting the people interested, and in opposition to the known wishes and interests of a large majority of the inhabitants of the new County of Pepin, and whereas said County contains only about seven townships of land, and full one-half unfit for settlements, and to support County Government would subject the people to heavy and burdensome taxation,**

**Therefore resolved, First, that while the County of Pepin remains as it now is, we will pay no tax to support County organization.**

**Second, that the Chairman of the Board of Supervisors of the Town be and is hereby instructed to oppose the levying of any tax by the County Board except for school and state purposes.**

**Third, that the Chairman of the Town may present his account for services in the County Board to the Town Board to be audited and receive his pay from the Town Treasurer.”**

- **July 10: Second organizational meeting; did not convene due to lack of quorum**
- **Sept 20: Meeting of the Board of County Equalization to determine how to assess taxes between Bear Creek and Pepin**
  - **Attended by Shaver and town assessors from Bear Creek (V.W. Dorwin) and Pepin (P.M. McInery) – plus assessors from self-formed townships of Albany (E.W. Crandall) and Lima (C. Owiss)**
  - **The Bear Creek assessor was in favor of admitting the Albany and Lima assessors**
  - **Shaver refused to admit them, saying they had no credentials and represented towns not officially created**

**In defiance, Dorwin (the Bear Creek assessor) moved to nominate Owiss (the Lima assessor) to act as chair of the Board of Equalization. Shaver called Dorwin to order. Crandall (the Albany assessor) then seconded Dorwin's motion, and Shaver called him to order. Dorwin then stated he "...would not act as a member of this Board if Mr. Crandall and Mr. Owiss were precluded a seat therein, even without**

credentials legal or illegal, and thereupon put his motion to a vote which was adopted by said Crandall and Owiss...."

Mr. McInery (the Pepin assessor) refused to take part in the vote ... and immediately and unceremoniously, Mr. Dorwin, Mr. Crandall, and Mr. Owiss retired." McInery, with the consent of the clerk Shaver (these two still made a quorum), assumed the chair and immediately adjourned the meeting until the following day. McInery and Shaver met on September 21 to finish the tax equalization. In the minutes of the meeting, Shaver recorded, "On motion of Mr. McInery, returns of the so-called Towns of Albany and Lima were added in with those of Town of Bear Creek."

- **Nov 9: First annual meeting of the Pepin County Board (2 earlier dates had failed for lack of quorum)**
  - Shaver served as acting chair
  - Recognized representatives from Bear Creek, Pepin, Albany, Lima and Waubeek (also mentioned Frankfort, but no representative present)

- **Elected Samuel B. Washburn (Waubeek) as board chair**
- **Pepin representative (Henry D Barron) made several motions to clarify that no new townships had been created at the March 15 meeting; the minutes state:**

**“Mr. Barron offered the following: Whereas, it is claimed by individuals purporting to be members of this Board that a legal and legitimate session of this Board of Supervisors of the County of Pepin, was held on the fifteenth day of March last, and that then and there Resolutions were in due and legal form, adopted, dividing the County of Pepin into towns claiming that those Towns known by the names of Albany, Frankfort, Lima, and Waubeek were created, be it Resolved: that this Board does not regard said meeting, or the proceedings thereof as parliamentary legal, regular, or in conformity with the Revised Statutes and Laws of our State; that we consider said meeting and said proceedings in violation of said Statutes and Laws; that consequently no such Towns**

as Albany, Frankfort, Lima, or Waubeek, do now exist and that persons claiming to be entitled to seats and membership in this Board therefrom are not entitled to such seats or membership.

Mr. Wood moved to lay the same upon the table, and the ayes and the no's being called for, the motion lay upon the table and was adopted by the following votes:

**Ayes - Campbell, Turner, Washburn, and Wood**

**No's - Barron”**

- **THEN** the new county board approved (4-1) a motion to amend the March meeting minutes to:
  1. Add Holbrook as present and a formal board member at the meeting,
  2. Strike all words calling Holbrook out-of-order and chastising him for disrupting the meeting, and
  3. Insert his name among the "Ayes" for the motion to create the four new towns
- Motion approved to create the Town of Stockholm out of the Town of Pepin

## **Afterwards ....**

- **Tensions continued between the northern and southern parts of Pepin County**
- **Pepin's growth steadied after a decline, while Durand continued to grow**
- **Power further shifted to Durand with a change in County Clerk in 1861 (Shaver retired, and Durand resident John Halverson was elected)**
- **County residents voted to move the county seat to Durand in 1868**