

The great boom: growth of the 'wooden city'

The lumbering and shipping boom on Chequamegon Bay began with the arrival of the Wisconsin Central Railroad in Ashland on June 2 1877. Within a few years the city boasted sawmills, wood-working plants, commercial warehouses and docks, along with a thriving tourist business. While the promise of iron ore mining on the Penokee Range proved illusory, beginning with the first shipment on July 16 1885, all of the iron ore from the mines on the Gogebic Range was shipped from Ashland on large ore carriers. By 1890, with three sawmills producing millions of board feet of lumber, and thousands of tons of imports and exports through three docks, the boom was also well underway in Washburn. The boom peaked about 1895 and 1896 and slowly declined thereafter as the pine timber was exhausted, the large sawmills closed, and shipping shifted to Superior and Duluth.

The June 1895 state census of Washburn showed a population of 5,178, six times the 1885 population of 741 people. Somewhat over half the people were foreign born, mostly from Norway and Sweden, followed by Canada and Germany. Along the waterfront there were, as noted, three

large sawmills, a city dock, and the coal, grain, and freight dock of the Omaha Railroad. The railroad's roundhouse and shops were located down from First Avenue West, while the passenger depot was on the southeast corner of Omaha Street and First Avenue East.

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There were numerous businesses scattered along Bayfield Street as far as Sixth Avenue West, including several saloons and board houses. The most important businesses were located in the business district from Central Avenue eastward. The Washburn State Bank occupied a stately brownstone building on the northeast corner of Bayfield Street and Central Avenue, while at the other end of the block the grand Washburn Hotel occupied several lots. Across from the hotel on the corner of First Avenue East there was a large warehouse and farther east the

Town Hall occupied the northeast corner of Bayfield Street and Third Avenue East. The large Union Block, the Bayfield County Bank, the town library, the newspaper office, a saloon, other business buildings, and the Opera Block lined the south side of the block. A large brick store was constructed across First Avenue East from the Opera Block.

It was originally anticipated that the village would grow to the east-hence the location of the Town Hall on Third Avenue East-but instead it spread to the west. By 1896 the western residential area extended from Washington Avenue to Tenth Avenue West. The eastern district extended from Washington Avenue only to Second Avenue East, with another section of houses farther to the north, mostly along Fourth Street between Second and Fifth Avenues East.

In 1890, with the exception of the Opera Block and the Union Block, Washburn was a "wooden city." But by 1896 there were a few brick building with brownstone facades, and three monumental buildings constructed entirely of brownstone-the Washburn State Bank, the Bayfield County Courthouse and the Walker High School. The high school,

dedicated in June 1894 and named for Peter Walker, the manger of one of the large sawmills, was located on the west side of Washington Avenue at Ninth Street. It was a massive building in the Romanesque architectural style, with towers, turrets, arched windows and doors, and a high, steeply pitched roof. Imaginatively resembling a castle, it was known to generations of high school students, who had to trudge up the hill in the teeth of winter gales to attend classes, as the "castle on the hill." The remote location and grandiose scale of the building reflected the expectation during the boom years that Washburn would become a great city, with the school surrounded by streets and avenues lined with homes, but that was not to be. The school was destroyed in a spectacular fire on February 5 1947, which the fire department was unable to control because of low water pressure. For three years, until the new high school was opened in May 1950, students attended classes in the Du Pont Club. While the building served adequately in that unintended capacity, it provided somewhat less than an ideal learning environment.