

How Washburn stole the county seat from Bayfield—Part 1

In the spring of 1892 a few of the leading men of Washburn formed a committee to renew the campaign, so cleverly thwarted by Bayfield in 1887, to move the county seat to Washburn. Determined not to be outmaneuvered by Bayfield again, they were prepared to play "hard ball." The methods they used to conduct their campaign must have made even the most seasoned practitioners of the grimy game of county politics blush.

As the first step on its journey of deception, the committee purchased five acres of land in Textor Park, a residential development on the east side of Washburn, for \$100. The land was then sold to the Town of Washburn for \$3,000, leaving a profit of \$2,900 to finance its campaign. The committee then set about trying to convince the citizens of the county that Washburn was the best place for the county seat. There were many people, particularly in the towns to the south, who thought that it should be moved to the center of the county. But the Washburn proponents argued that the county seat should be located where most of the people lived, which was in the Washburn-Bayfield area. And

they insisted that it should be moved to Washburn because Washburn was more convenient to get to than Bayfield and a better place to visit because it was large and prosperous. Weak as these arguments in favor of Washburn as

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the county seat were, those advanced to convince people that the wooden Pioneer School was equal to the brownstone courthouse in Bayfield were positively audacious. The school board sold the school to two leaders of the campaign, falsely claiming that it was no longer needed and was badly in need of repair. With the support of the committee and businessmen, these two men, maintaining that the building was actually in good condition and could easily be made suitable for a courthouse for less money than repairing the

courthouse in Bayfield, donated the school to the county for that purpose.

Then, to insure that there were enough signatures on the petitions supporting the county seat change required by law to be submitted to the county board, a large piece of land in the village was purchased and divided into small lots, which were sold to willing participants in the fraud, for \$1.00. The purchasers, now being land owners, added their names to the petitions, which were then submitted to the county board. The board accepted the petitions and ordered the question of moving the county seat to be on the ballot for the general election on November 11th.

With the voters of Washburn expected to support the county seat change proposal, and those in Bayfield to oppose it, the committee members believed that the key to the approval of the change proposal lay with the voters in Iron River. Not leaving anything to chance, they set about trying to buy votes there and elsewhere in the county. As it turned out they need not have worried, for the total of the votes in Washburn

alone, approving the change, was larger than all of the votes opposing it throughout the rest of the county. The result of the county seat change referendum was confirmed by Governor George W. Peck on November 29, 1892, proclaiming that henceforth the county seat of Bayfield County was in the village of Washburn. With the theft of the county seat legally sanctioned by the governor's proclamation, the committee turned to the practical matter of making the transfer a reality by stealing the county records from the Bayfield Courthouse. The story of that final act in this dramatic "tale of two cities" will be told in part 2.

(Chequamegon Bay And Its Communities II: Washburn The City To Be, A History 1883-1947 is available in searchable format on the Wisconsin Historical Society website: Go to <www.wisconsinhistory.org> select "Research;" under "Databases & Collections, select "Wisconsin County Histories;" under "Find Books about a County," select "Bayfield County" from the "Select a County" menu.)