

# The founding of Ashland<sup>-2</sup>

163

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## Part 2

During the 1860s Ashland and Bay City were all but abandoned, the 1860 federal census showing only 67 people as living in the two settlements. Those enumerated in the census included the founders of the settlement—Whittlesey, Kilborn, Beaser, and Ellis as well as early settlers—Martin Roehm, Conrad Goeltz, George W. and Albert C. Stuntz, Eugene F. Prince, Allen Barber, and others. By 1863 both townsites were deserted. The only occasional inhabitants were Martin Roehm and family during the summers. They spent the winters on their farm in the Marengo river Valley, where they raised cattle.

The rebirth of Ashland began when the survey line of the Wisconsin Central Railroad northward from Manitowoc confirmed that Ashland was to be the Chequamegon Bay terminal of the railroad. Construction began at Menasha in June 1871, and by early November the line was completed 53 miles to Stevens Point. Construction from Stevens Point northward began in March 1872 and in September the road was opened to Colby, 51 miles north of Stevens Point. To expedite completion of the road the company decided to build from Ashland southward at the same time, and the construction of a freight dock and other facilities began there in April



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1872. On April 15th the ground-breaking for the railroad took place with due ceremony over which Samuel S. Vaughn presided, while Asaph Whittlesey dug the first shovel full of dirt and made a short speech; actual track laying began on July 7th. The expected completion date of the 30 miles from Ashland to the Penokee Range was November 15th. But now Ashland suffered the first of several rude shocks from the real world of railroad building. Because of the exceedingly difficult terrain and unusually wet weather, construction from Ashland had only reached the White River, six miles south of Ashland, by December 26 1872. Here a wrought iron bridge, 1,560 feet long across the river valley and 102 feet above the river, was constructed. Work on the line northward was stopped at section 53 at Colby, 55.5 miles from Stevens

Point, on November 28th. The construction company was then forced to suspend work because of financial difficulties.

Thus, Ashland's hopes and expectations for a railroad by 1873 were rudely dashed. But then a more pressing problem arose—the so-called "Ashland War." When construction was suspended on December 26th, the company had discharged the workers as of that date. There were 1,200 men living in camps from the Penokee Range to Ashland who depended on their wages for their livelihood and who had been told that they would be employed all winter. The only way out of the area was by stage 80 miles from Ashland to Superior, since the bay was frozen and no boats were running. So as not to overcrowd the boarding facilities at Ashland and along the road to Superior, company officials began to pay the men in small groups at the various camps from the south northward. Most of the men departed without incident, but at Kelly's camp the men, who had been waiting a few days for their wages, demanded to be paid to date rather than just to December 26th. Escaping an unruly crowd at the camp, company officials managed to reach Ashland, where the town chairman closed the saloons. On New Year's Day men from Kelly's camp reached Ashland. Two men were dispatched to Bayfield to

summon the sheriff, who arrived that night with a posse of 42 men. The town was placed under martial law, order was quickly restored, and a settlement was reached with the workers, who departed Ashland peaceably.

After this burst of excitement, Ashland endured the winter doldrums until spring, when work was resumed at White River on April 21 1873. By early September track had reached Silver Creek, where another wrought iron bridge, about half the size of the White River structure was erected. Track was laid to Penokee gap by October 4th and the first train arrived there from Ashland on October 9th. Meanwhile, work was resumed at Colby on April 25th and stopped at Worcester on January 6 1874, leaving a gap of about 57 miles between the two ends of track. Hardy souls could take the train to the end of the line at Penokee gap, then travel by sled or wagon across the intervening 57 miles of wilderness to Worcester and there take the train to Stevens Point, Milwaukee, and other cities. In early 1875 the trip across the gap was eased somewhat by a stage line, the trip taking two days for a fare of \$10; the overall trip from Ashland to Milwaukee took four days. A small settlement named Penoka grew up at the gap to serve travelers crossing the gap.