

# The founding of Ashland-3

CJ 8/2/12  
Part 3

With the Wisconsin Central Railroad's line northward actually under construction, Ashland's future seemed assured, and the town grew and developed rapidly in a "boom" atmosphere. On May 27 1872, in response to a petition from the "residents of Ashland," the Ashland County Board of Supervisors organized the Town of Ashland. Earlier in the year Ashland (formerly Whittlesey), Bay City, and Vaughn's intervening tract had been consolidated as the village of Ashland. On July 13th the town officers were elected, with Sam Fifield chosen as chairman of the Board of Supervisors. On July 17 the board met and dealing with first things first, arranged for the construction of a "town prison" and agreed on fees for liquor licenses, with some attention to road construction. At its meeting the following week the board dealt extensively with road matters, made further arrangements for a "town prison," and established a school district.

Ashland continued to grow during 1873, although the pace of building diminished considerably from the previous year. New homes and stores were constructed, a brick yard was established, and the Ashland Lumber Company built a 600 foot dock. There were "upwards of 700 inhabitants" in the settlement, with "80 children attending school regular-



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ly." As the end of 1873 approached, the Ashland Weekly Press found every reason to be optimistic. "Why Feel Blue?" it asked, for "Ashland's prospects were never brighter than today." The Wisconsin Central will certainly reach Ashland by the next summer, new settlers will continue to arrive, and the "waste places" will be filled "with the hives of industry."

Once again Ashland was held hostage to the vicissitudes of railroad financing and politics, complicated by a deep depression that was to last five years. But the 30 mile "pig-tail" railroad to Penochee gap proved to be the village's salvation. One historian noted that "Despite the fact that the Ashland-Penochee division was an isolated strip of railroad, immediately upon its completion, traffic in freight and passengers became so heavy that the few engines and cars were inadequate

to handle it. Demands for movement of lumber equipment and forest products overwhelmed the little railroad. The only railroad in northern Wisconsin and the only route out of Ashland southward, this isolated piece of railroad at once became the quick and easy approach to Lake Superior from the interior." Hardy souls could even take the train to the end of the line at Penochee gap, then travel by sled, wagon or on foot (and later by stage) across the intervening 57 miles of wilderness to Worcester and there take the train to Stevens Point, Milwaukee, and other cities. A small settlement named Penochee grew up at the gap to serve travelers.

But the little community struggled on despite the loss of population, the lack of a railroad connection, and adverse economic conditions. A brewery was established, a town hall planned, and the saws of the Ashland Lumber Company continued to hum. In August 1874 a visitor from Michigan described Ashland as follows: "The number of buildings would seem to indicate a population of not less than twelve or fifteen hundred, but as many of the stores and dwellings are vacant, there are probably not over seven or eight hundred people in the place. . . . In 1873 the value of new buildings erected and other improvements made, is estimated in round figures at half a million dollars. There are four

substantial merchandise piers, with accompanying warehouses, costing in the aggregate, over \$100,000. A saw mill owned by the Ashland Lumber Company will turn out 2,000,000 feet of lumber this year, half of which goes to Isle Royale. . . . A door, sash and blind factory, owned by White & Dunbar, is one of the institutions of the town, the product of which is mostly shipped to Isle Royale and other points on the lake. The town contains ten stores, of all kinds, two large breweries, the usual number of hotels and saloons, while the education and morals of the place are taken care of by one church (Methodist), [and] two good schools. . . . There are three miles of graded streets, and many more of wooden sidewalks; the buildings as might be expected are entirely new, and among them are some very neat tasty residences." The 1875 State Census, taken in the midyear, showed a population of 448 in the Town of Ashland (268 males, 180 females). Assuming that the census is accurate and allowing for a few people on farms, the population of the village of Ashland was probably about 400 people. The difference between this figure and the estimate in early 1873 of "upwards of 700 inhabitants" probably reflects the loss of population due to the suspension of railroad construction.