

History of Racine County

Woodland Indians were the earliest known inhabitants of Racine County. In the latter half of the 17th Century, French fur traders and missionaries, including Nicholas Perrot and Fathers Claude Allouez and Jacques Marquette, found predominately Miami Indians inhabiting the lands along Racine's Root River.

By 1720, the Miami tribe had moved on and the area had become the home of the Potawatomi Indians. In the late 1820's, at a place then called Skunk Grove, Jacques and Louis Vieaux set up a fur trading post with the Potawatomi. A historic marker has been placed at the site, which is now in the Town of Mount Pleasant.

In 1805, Congress created the Michigan Territory, which included all the land that is now in the State of Wisconsin. In 1818, the land west of Lake Michigan was divided into three counties. As settlers moved in, new Counties were split off from those original three. Milwaukee County was founded in 1834, the year Captain Knapp arrived, and included all the land along the lake south to Illinois. In 1836, the Wisconsin Territory was organized. That same year, this area was sufficiently inhabited to warrant separation from Milwaukee County, and Racine County was formed. It did not take on its present-day borders, however, until 1850, when Kenosha County was created out of its southernmost portion.

Following the Black Hawk War in 1832, "Wisconsin Fever" brought many pioneers from Western New York State, rural New England and Britain to this area. Explorer Gilbert Knapp founded Racine in 1834. He had visited the area at the mouth of the Root River several times during his travels. He started the settlement of Port Gilbert with a warehouse and trading post. However, the name Port Gilbert never gained acceptance over the earlier Indian designation of Chippecotton (Root River) or its French version, Racine, and in 1841 the community was incorporated as the Village of Racine. Shortly after statehood was granted in 1848, the brand new Wisconsin legislature voted to incorporate the Village of 3,000 as the City of Racine.

Soon after Captain Knapp founded his settlement on Lake Michigan, other pioneers were settling areas to the west. Lemuel Smith, who arrived in 1835, was said to have been the first settler in Burlington. David Bushnell and Herman and Elizabeth Loomis arrived the following year. In 1836, Levi Godfrey and John Wade built a log house in what is now Rochester. S.E. Chapman and Levi Barnes came to Waterford the same year.

Before the American Civil War, Racine was well known for its strong opposition to slavery. Many slaves escaping to freedom via the Underground Railroad passed through the city. IN 1854 Joshua Glover, an escaped slave who had made a home in Racine, was arrested as a fugitive and taken to a jail in Milwaukee. One hundred men from Racine, and ultimately 5,000 Wisconsinites broke in to the jail and freed him. He was helped to escape to Canada. Glover's rescue gave rise to many legal complications and a great deal of litigation. The ordeal of Glover eventually lead to the Wisconsin Supreme Court declaring the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 unconstitutional, and later, the Wisconsin State Legislature refusing to recognize the authority of the US Supreme Court.

When the Civil War began, the men of Racine County responded by forming the "Belle City Rifles." Over the course of that conflict, more than 2,000 of Racine County's sons fought in the Union Army. Almost 275 were killed, including Colonel Hans Christian Heg, one of the founders of the Town of Norway and the highest-ranking officer from the State of Wisconsin to perish in the War. A statue honoring him is located in the County's Heg Park.

A multitude of immigrants, including Danes, Germans and Czechs began to settle in Racine between the Civil War and the First World War. African Americans started arriving in large numbers during World War I as they did in other midwestern industrial towns, and Mexicans started migrating to Racine from roughly 1925 onward.

Unitarians from New England initially dominated Racine's religious life, as they did in other parts of the Upper Midwest before 1880. Racine's Emmaus Lutheran Church is the oldest Danish Lutheran Church in North America, founded on August 22, 1851. Emmaus Lutheran, originally part of the American Lutheran Church, merged with the Lutheran Church in America in 1988, to form the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Agricultural History

Racine County land has been farmed for 2,000 years. The first Racine County farmers, members of the Hopewell Culture that inhabited the area some 1,300 to 1,900 years ago, grew corn, beans, squash and tobacco. Later, the Potawatomi added melons and pumpkins, and introduced the harvesting of maple sap and sugar.

The primary crop for the first European settlers was wheat. The Perkins flouring mill of Burlington sent the first Wisconsin wheat back east in the 1840's. After the Civil War, however, dairy farming became more important, and remains so today. In 1998, there were 650 farms, covering 136,000 acres, in Racine County.

The first industry in Racine County was agriculture-related, and included the manufacture of Fanning mills, machines that separated wheat grain from chaff. In 1842, 24-year old Jerome Increase Case came from New York State with a combined thresher-separator that he had invented. He started production of his machine in Rochester, in competition with a local company, Fanning Mills. Case moved his factory to the City of Racine a few years later. The company he founded, originally J.I. Case but now CNH, is still headquartered in Racine and continues to be a world leader in the manufacture and sale of agricultural and construction equipment.

As dairy farming became more prevalent, it resulted in the development of other industries within Racine County. Wagner Specialty Company of Burlington produced bull rings and calf weaners for use by farmers. In the years following the Civil War, the Horlick Malted Milk Company of Racine sold the powdered milk and malted milk that British immigrant William Horlick developed. The Wisconsin Condensed Milk Company was active in Burlington.

Manufacturing and Industry History

Racine County became a center for manufacturing and industry. In 1873, Reverend J.W. Carhart put together one of the first steam-powered automobiles. J.I. Case and Mitchell & Lewis were among a group of Racine-based car manufacturers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The car companies generated the establishment of other businesses that provided vehicle parts, including Walker Manufacturing Company (jacks and mufflers), Twin Disc (clutches) and Modine Manufacturing Company (heat transfer products and torque converters). These companies sustain even though no cars have been manufactured in Racine County for years.

During this same time period, S.C. Johnson founded a company to manufacture and distribute floor wax products. Johnson's enterprise has grown into one of the largest manufacturers of personal, household and professional cleaning products and insect control products in the world, now known as S.C. Johnson, A Family Company.

These years also saw the growth of Western Publishing Company. When a small printing business came under the control of the Wadewitz family of Racine, it blossomed into a large firm well known throughout the world for publishing "Little Golden Books."

In the early years of the 20th Century, Fred Osius established the United States Standard Electrical Works Company, and made Racine the world leader in fractional horsepower electrical motors. His motor powered a number of products, including the "cyclone drink mixer," more commonly known today as a blender. Osius then started a company called Hamilton Beach after two of his colleagues. Hamilton and Beach later left the firm to start another company, Dumore Manufacturing Company, which manufactured products in Racine for many years.

Another Racine inventor, John W. Hammes, invented the garbage disposal in 1927. He founded the company InSinkErator in Racine, which still produces millions of garbage disposers a year.

Other manufacturing firms that were founded in Racine County include:

- Andis Hair Clippers
- Dremel Tools (small power tools)
- Ruud Lighting

Western Racine County, the most agricultural area of Racine County, has still had its share of industrial firms. In 1843, the Perkins Woolen Mill produced the first machine-made roll of cloth made in Wisconsin. The Burlington Blanket Company invented and manufactured the first stay-on horse blanket. In later years, the firm produced felt linings for many of the first automobiles as well as gun belts and ammunition used in World Wars I and II. The Multiscope and Film Company manufactured the world's first panoramic camera, known as the Al-vista camera.

Burlington Brass Works produced the "kant-leak" valve for sink faucets, and made gun shell casings for the armed forces in World War II and the Korean War. Anton Zweibel of Burlington invented the first folding ironing board. Burlington was also home to the Klein Beverage Company, which shipped its ginger beer and other soft drinks around the world.

Currently, a large factory producing Nestle chocolate products gives Burlington the nickname "Chocolate City." Hi-Liter Graphics, Runzheimer International, Hypro, LDV, Inc., Echo Lake Produce and Packaging Corporation of American are also located in the western part of the County.

Racine County continues to be the home of new technology. Aha! Studios is a leader in computer graphics and animation for films, games, arena scoreboards, etc. The firm is not only headquartered in Racine, but plans to start a school for computer animators.

Many Racine County businesses started here and expanded all over the globe. Several major corporations are headquartered in Racine County included foreign-based companies. In addition to Nestle, these include Putzmeister, Saint Gobain Containers, and Bombardier Recreational Products.