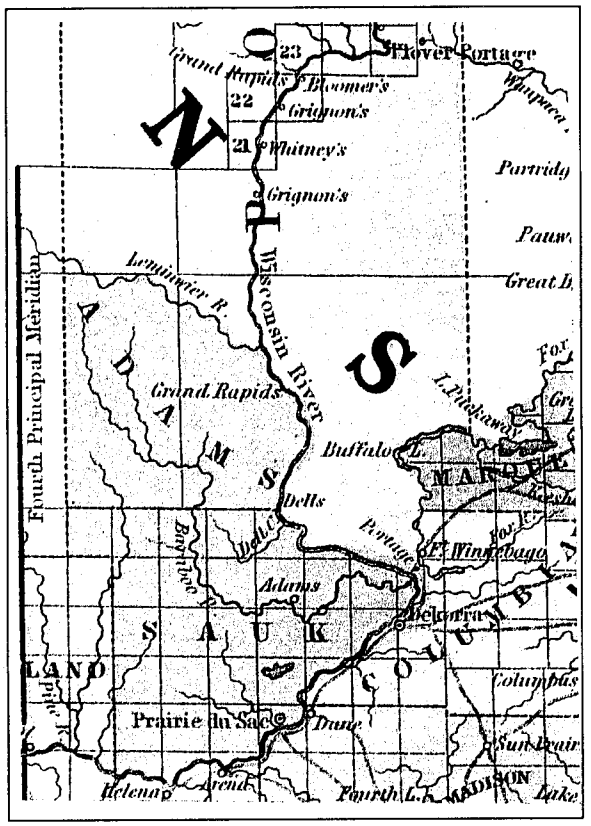


County Government

Why Adams County?

Adams County was created by the legislature of Wisconsin Territory on March 11, 1848. Reportedly named in honor of both John Adams, the second President of the United States, and John Quincy Adams, the sixth President who died in February 1848, the entire county was west of the Wisconsin and south of the Lemonweir Rivers in what is now southern and western Juneau County. The non-Indian population of this area was less than 200, far too small to justify or support a county government. So why was Adams County created? Therein lies a story.

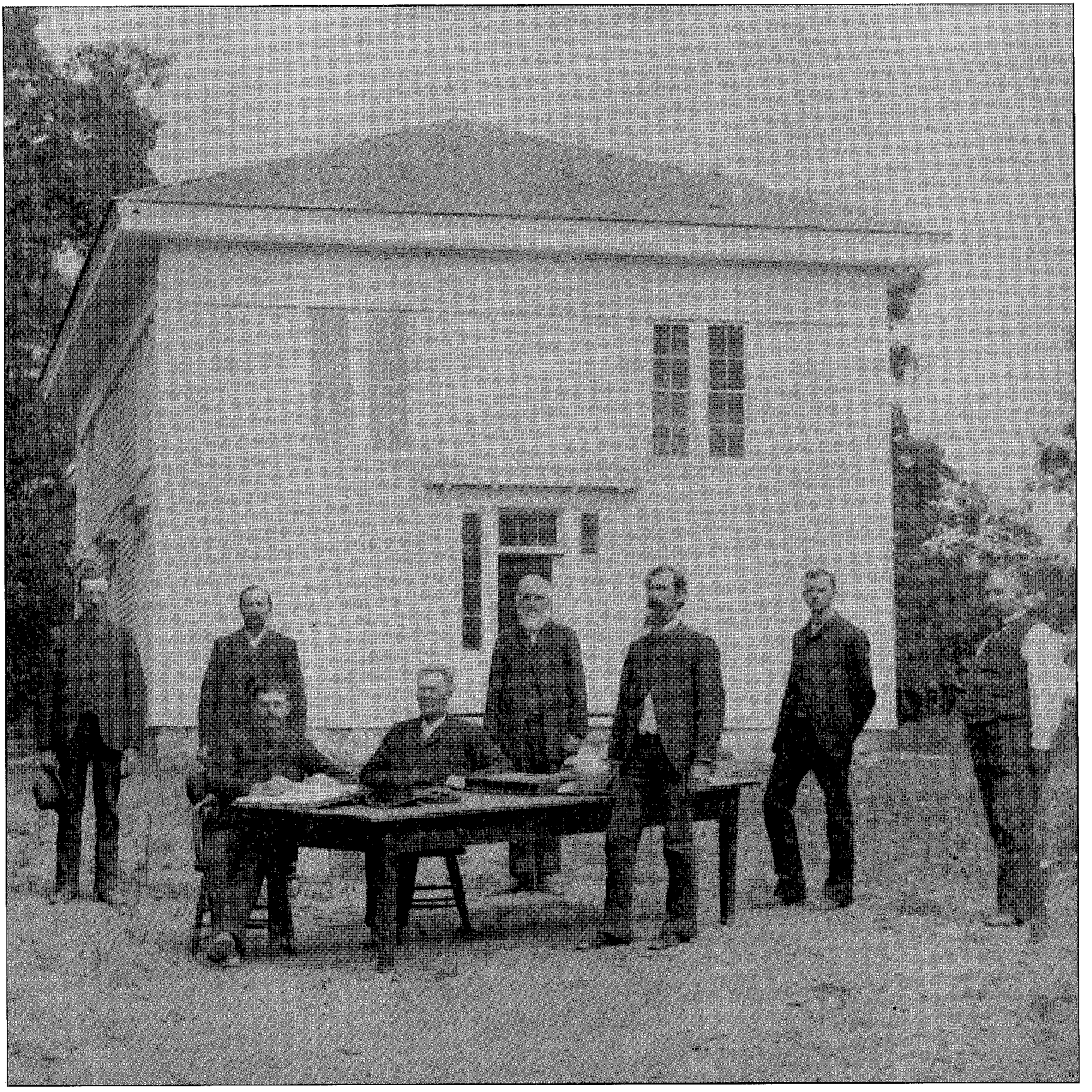
In the 1840s, Sauk County was involved in a dispute over the site of its county seat, which the legislature had placed at Prairie du Sac in 1844. Since Prairie du Sac was located on the southern edge of the county, it was expected that county residents would someday relocate the county seat to a more centrally-located site. In fact, one limitation the legislature placed on counties selecting a site was that the county seat be located reasonably near the center of the county.

As expected, settlers moved into central and northern Sauk and demanded that the county seat be moved out of Prairie du Sac. The leading contenders for the honor were two new villages on the Baraboo River, Reedsburg and "Adams." In a hotly-contested election in 1846, county voters selected "Adams" for their county seat.

Reedsburg boosters refused to accept the loss and worked to reverse it. They suffered a setback when the legislature, led by Delano Pratt of "Adams" village, created Adams County just north of Reedsburg. No connection between the naming of "Adams" village and Adams County has been found--yet. Perhaps it is only a coincidence.

When the new boundary lines were drawn, Reedsburg found itself on the northern edge of Sauk County and less eligible for the county seat. Reedsburg then countered by electing one of its own, Caleb Crosswell, to the legislature in 1850. He persuaded the legislature to change the borders and shift nearly all of the original Adams County

***Above:** An 1849 map of Wisconsin depicting the original Adams County west of the Wisconsin and south of the Lemonweir Rivers and the village of Adams in Sauk County.*



Friendship founder Luther Stowell organized the County Seat Building Company and promised county voters to build a court house in Friendship if the voters agreed to move the county seat there. The voters agreed and Stowell kept his promise. Completed in 1859, the court house had a central hallway with offices for county officials downstairs and a courtroom/meeting hall upstairs. Although some county offices were moved to the stone building in 1869, the 1859 court house remained in use until 1913. Depicted here are county officials in the late 1880s: (l-r standing) Sheriff W.Atcherson, George Waterman, District Attorney O. Lapham, Register of Deeds J. Gunning, Clerk of Courts A. Hamilton, Judge John Keyes; (sitting) Treasurer F. Powers and Clerk C. Simons

into Sauk County. Now Reedsburg was closer to the center of Sauk than its rival and a stronger candidate for the county seat.

Reedsburg now demanded that the Sauk county seat be moved. No action was taken and in 1853, Crosswell was replaced in the legislature by Charles Armstrong of "Adams." He persuaded the legislature to restore the old border between Adams and Sauk counties, once again placing Reedsburg on the edge of the county. In 1855, Sauk County voters rejected a final proposal put forth by Reedsburg to move the county seat. It remained in the old village of "Adams," which had, in the meantime, acquired the name it goes by today--Baraboo.

By 1853, after all the county borders had been shuffled into place, Adams County covered all of what is now Adams and Juneau counties. With settlement progressing and the federal land survey complete, it was time for the work of county government to begin.

After the election of April 1853, the first meeting of the Adams county board was held in the home of William Palmer, located in Section 7 of the Town of Quincy. Palmer's homestead was close to Henry Kingsbury's ferry which crossed the river at Table Rock, where the Castle Rock dam was later built. Five towns sent supervisors: Grand Marsh, Ralph Patrick; Jackson, George Knox; Quincy, Thomas J. Greenwood; Lemonweir, A.P. Ayers; Necedah, John Werner. With the east siders in the majority, Grand Marsh's Ralph Patrick was elected as the first chair of the county board, with the west siders agreeing to make it unanimious.

High on the board's agenda was the verification of the election for county officers, which was performed by justices of the peace Seth Thompson, White Creek, and William Stearns, Camp Douglas. Approximately 500 voters--all male--cast ballots in this first county election. West siders swept the legal and law enforcement departments: county judge, E.S. Minor; sheriff, W. J. Sayers; attorney, D. A. Bigelow. East siders took over the record-keeping jobs: county clerk, William H. Spain, Quincy; clerk of court, John Patrick, Grand Marsh; register of deeds, William H. Palmer, Quincy; treasurer, S. G. Holbrook, Quincy; surveyor, Caleb McArthur. In what must have been a confusing ballot, W.I. Webster, the first county coroner, defeated his opponent, W. J. Webster, by a total of twenty votes.

In its early years, the county board spent much of its time responding to the consequences of rapid settlement. As the population grew and shifted throughout the county, new towns were organized and the borders of older towns were adjusted. The short-lived towns of Big Spring (New Haven), Chester (New Chester, Easton), White Creek (Quincy, Easton), Newark Valley (Quincy, Strongs Prairie), Barton (Richfield), Verona (Big Flats) and Brownville (Big Flats) were organized on the east side, and as many or more on the west.

The supervisors also chartered the first county highway which ran from Quincy to the Marsh House, via White Creek. The state then called for the county to lay out east-west routes from the Marquette county line to the Wisconsin River in Quincy and from Wautoma to Petenwell Rock. A north-south route from Wisconsin Dells to Plainville, Friendship and Big Flats to the Wood county line was sketched out in 1858, as a replacement for the Pinery Road. While the state or the county may have chartered these roads, neither was the main source of funding. Road and bridge construction and maintenance--such as it was--would remain the responsibility of the townships for the rest of the century.

Public schools and the poor also were a town responsibility in the 1850s, although the county would assume a larger role in later decades.

One question the supervisors tackled early on was the construction of a courthouse. After no one responded to a request for bids to build a wood-frame court house and office building in Quincy, the board voted to accept the offer of space in a building constructed by Stillman Niles in Section 19 of Quincy. The two-story building had a

Town Organization Dates

Adams-	**1860**	**New Chester-**	**1861**
Big Flats-	**1861**	**New Haven-**	**1860**
Colburn-	**1890**	**Preston-**	**1860**
Dell Prairie-	**1855**	**Quincy-**	**1853**
Easton-	**1860**	**Richfield-**	**1859**
Jackson-	**1855**	**Rome-**	**1857**
Lincoln-	**1861**	**Springville-**	**1855**
Leola-	**1857**	**Strongs Prairie-**	**1860**
Monroe-	**1859**		

meeting room for the board and the court upstairs and space for the desks and record books of county officers downstairs. No jail was built on the premises so the accused waiting for trial and those convicted of county violations were transported by horse and wagon to the Columbia county jail in Portage. The county's rent for the Niles property, which was also used as a public meeting hall by the Quincy Masons, the Republican Party, and other groups, was $200 per year. Firewood to heat the building cost taxpayers an additional $25-$30.

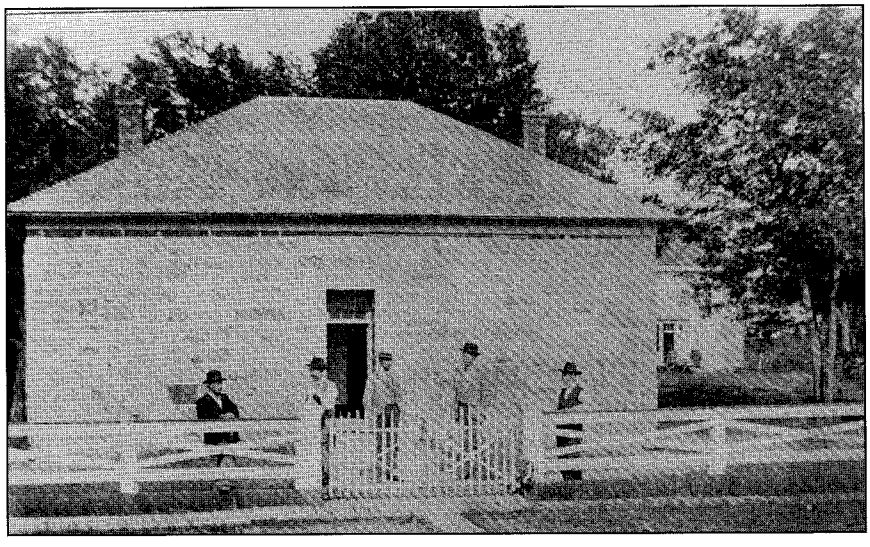
As early as 1854, the balance of county population had shifted to the west side of the river. Milton Maughs, founder of Mauston, was elected chair of the county board in '54 and '55. By 1856, the west siders on the board--who each represented one town--outnumbered the east siders, 13-11. The trend was obvious and led the west siders to petition the legislature to establish a new county. A referendum was held in the west side towns that resulted in the organization of Juneau County in 1857. Adams county settled accounts with its neighbor across the river and adopted the borders it has maintained ever since.

About the same time that Juneau and Adams counties were separating, Luther Stowell, William Burbank and a number of other New York immigrants were establishing the village of Friendship. They also organized the County Seat Building Company and, in January 1858, asked the county board to petition the legislature to move the county seat to their new village. In return the Company would donate land for and build a court house in Friendship. The required referendum was held in April 1858 and Friendship won by a margin of 155 votes. Construction began almost immediately on the new court house, with specifications closely resembling those of the two-story, 26 x 40 foot building that the board sought but did not find bidders for in Quincy in 1856.

The first meeting of the county board in Friendship took place in July 1859. Nineteen towns were represented: Adams, Dell Prairie, Easton, Jackson, Leola, Monroe, New Haven, Preston, Quincy, Richfield, Rome, Springville, and Strongs Prairie, plus now long gone Brownville, Barton, Chester, Grand Marsh, Newark Valley and White Creek. Lincoln and Colburn had yet to be organized. The chair of the board was J.W. Tyler of Springville.

The building that Stillman Niles rented to the county, and which was often called the "court house," remained in Quincy for a number of years. It was not moved to Friendship, as stated by some, nor did it stay in Quincy. It currently stands in Section 6 of Strongs Prairie on the south side of old County Highway J.

Above: *The Adams County Board met on the second floor of this building in Quincy from 1853 to 1859. It still stands on old County J near Dellwood.* ***Below:*** *The stone "root house" stood on the court house lawn and was used for county offices from 1869 to 1913.*



The 1860s-1900s

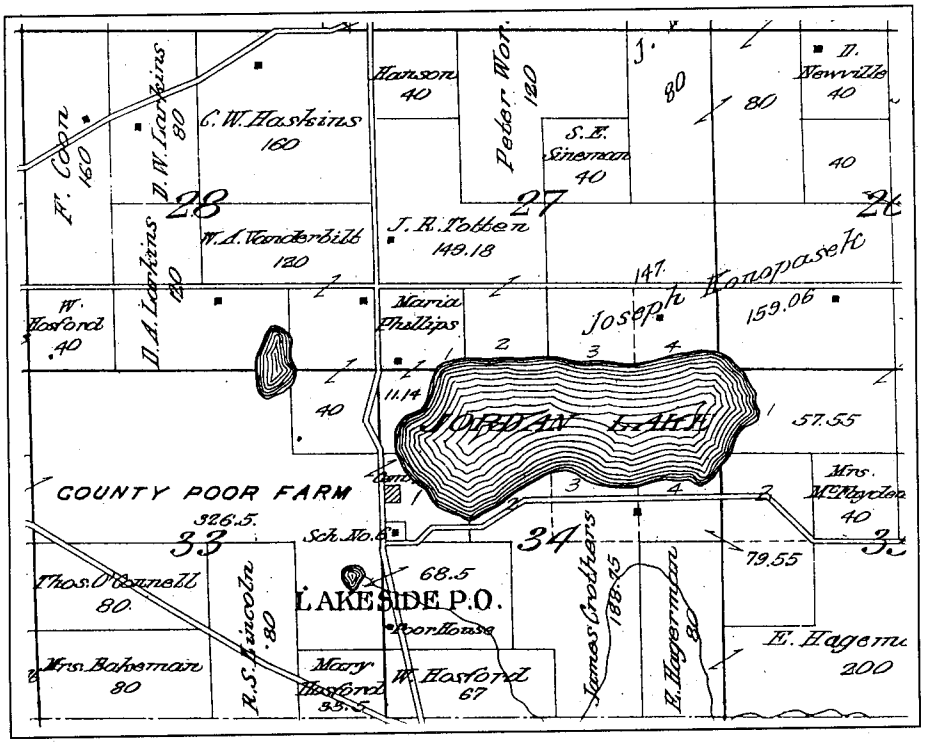
The 1860s began with a major reorganization of county government in Wisconsin. The township system, whereby each town sent one supervisor to the county board, was altered to a commission system. Adams County was divided into three districts, each one of which sent a "commissioner" to the county board. The first commissioners were mill owner Seth Thompson, White Creek; newspaper editor J.C. Chandler, Friendship; and farmer Andrew Jackson, White Creek. This system remained in place until 1868, when the township system was restored.

Of more lasting impact was the creation of the position of county school superintendent in 1861. Mandated by the state, the superintendent was to act as both supervisor of and advocate for the country schools, which were created, managed and funded almost entirely by local districts organized by the towns. The superintendent's job was to inspect the schools and insure that they met minimal state standards and supervise teachers who, in many cases, were only slightly more educated than their students. For example, the superintendent encouraged local school districts to purchase books and blackboards, install good stoves and supply enough firewood to keep the scholars warm on frosty mornings. The superintendent could withhold county and state aid from local districts that failed to meet standards.

The superintendent also reported to the county board on the condition of schools, his efforts on behalf of education, and defended the use of county and state taxes for schools. The job grew with the school system. Adams County supplied $1,067 in aid to seventeen schools in 1867 and $18,569 to 82 schools in 1900. The first election for county superintendent took place in 1862, but the first Adams superintendent on record was J.C. Yocum, Point Bluff, elected in 1864.

The county was also in charge of care for the elderly, orphaned, impoverished or disabled without family or means to care for themselves. In the 1850s and '60s, and for the rest of the century for those in temporary need, the county and the towns paid those who provided care for the "poor." Merchants who supplied food and clothing, doctors and midwives who provided health care, even neighbors who provided lodging, submitted bills and were reimbursed. In 1858, for example, the county paid out $427.70 to fourteen providers--merchants and millers--who served the "poor."

In 1871, the county took its first step to provide long-term care for the "poor" by appointing George W. Waterman, D.L. McConick and L. W. Holmes Superintendents of the Poor and delegating them to buy land for a county farm. Located in Section 29 of Jackson, (about threes miles south of Highway 82 on County Highway G) the county farm grew to a total of 556 acres. Despite the usually aged and infirm condition of its residents, the county farm was a working farm. Residents were expected to work the land as much as they were able, as was the overseer and his family. Additional work was contracted out. In 1878, the farm had sixteen residents, including two under four years of age. The farm operation produced wheat, oats, corn, buckwheat, rye, potatoes, turnips, onions, tobacco, cheese, butter, apples, pickles and one barrel of sauerkraut. Livestock numbered 22 cattle, 22 hogs, and 3 horses, plus laying hens.



A home for the elderly, the orphaned and the disabled, the county poor farm was located off County G west and south of Jordan Lake.

Expenses came to about $2,900 for the year, partially offset by income from the farm and also from other counties with residents at the Adams farm. "We find by computation that it has cost about $1.88 per week for the support of the inmates for the past year," reported the committee supervising the farm in 1878.

The county farm was a refuge for orphaned youngsters, the elderly, the handicapped and the disabled. As state institutions developed to care for the blind, the deaf, the mentally ill, the developmentally disabled and those with seizure disorders, fewer of them were housed at the poor farm. It became a home for the impoverished elderly who relied on the county to care for them until it closed in 1951.

The county was also the legal and law enforcement arm of local government. The most durable figure in the county courts of the 1800s was Solon W. Pierce. Lawyer, state legislator, newspaper publisher, Civil War veteran and author, Pierce served as county judge for two years then held the position of county attorney for all but four of the thirty years between 1869 and 1899.

He used the editorial pages of his *Adams County Press* to comment on legal matters in the county and, of course, promote his own election campaigns. "There isn't in all the Northwest another county where the people are so peaceably disposed," he wrote in 1866. "At the last term of the Circuit Court here there was not a single contested case on the calendar...everybody has means to meet their obligations, and are also honest enough to do so."

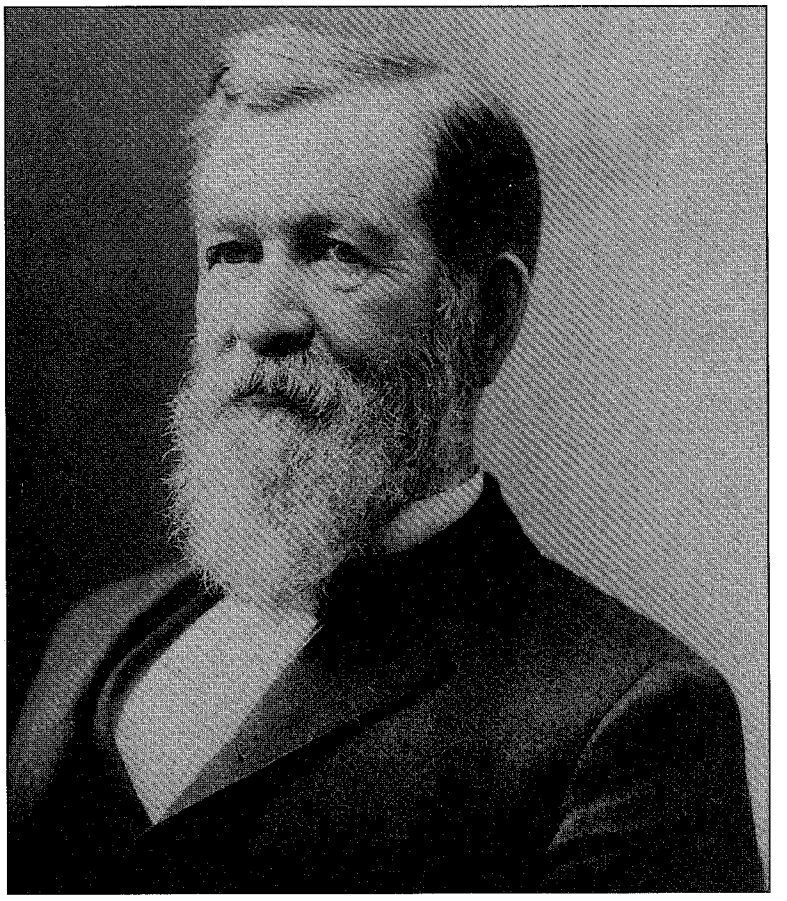
The situation had not changed greatly by 1878 when Pierce reported that, "The June term of the Circuit Court for 1878 proved to be the shortest ever held in this county. There were the meager number of 12 cases only on the calendar, and but one of these was a jury case....The tax payers are to be congratulated; but this showing doesn't indicate that the county is much of a paradise for lawyers."

The county attorney was one of the lawyers for whom the county wasn't "paradise." As Pierce pointed out in 1879, his salary was a mere $250 a year, while the county clerk pulled down a magnificent $600 per annum.

If Pierce's salary was determined by his case load, even $250 might have been too much. Legal activity continued at a snail's pace into the 1880s. In 1883, 1885 and 1886, Judge Alva Stewart canceled court sessions because "there is but little if any business." Near the end of 1888, Pierce pointed out that the county "has not had a convict or any person confined in jail during the year. In 1889, he opined that, "If it wasn't for the name of it, and that we all like to see Judge Stewart at least as often as once a year, Adams county could get along without any terms of the circuit court."

The light criminal case load probably had a great deal to do with the county supervisors' reluctance to build a jail. The court house built in 1858-'59 had a court room/board room on the second floor, plus quarters for the sheriff, judge and other county offices on the ground floor, but no jail. The county board did supply the sheriff with a set of handcuffs and leg irons which he occasionally used to secure a suspect to a tree on the court house lawn, but resisted all arguments to build a jail.

In 1868, it was revealed that the county had not actually taken title to the court house. Luther



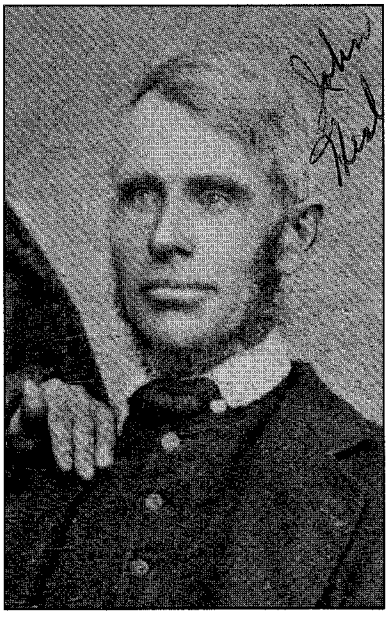
Solon Wesley Pierce--Civil War veteran, attorney-at-law, county prosecutor and judge, newspaper editor, state legislator and railroad booster--was the most prominent person in the county from the 1860s until his death in 1909.

Stowell, whose Court House Building Company still held title to the building and the grounds, announced that the Company would relinquish the title if the supervisors would build a county jail, perhaps by digging a basement beneath the court house. A hail of criticism was showered on the Building Company, whose officers were accused of looting the public purse, even though they had not charged the taxpayers a penny to build the court house or acquire the grounds around it. Suitably chastened, Stowell and his partners turned over the title to the court house and the supervisors took no further action on the jail.

They did build what looked like a jail. Completed in 1869, the renowned "stone-building" was a windowless, sandstone blockhouse squatting on the court house lawn. It was designed to provide fire and burglar proof quarters for county officers and public records. Pierce reported that his out-of-town colleagues jokingly referred to it as the "root-house" where Adams county housed its public officials like rutabagas.

Despite the jokes, the "root-house" was a down to earth solution to the real problem of protecting vital records from fire. Unlike several other counties, where early records have been lost in court house fires, Adams still has original material dating back to its first years. Not only fireproof, the root-house remained burglarproof until a 1900 break-in and only failed then because the county board had succumbed to the register of deed's pleas for more space, fresh air and light, and built a wooden addition--with windows--onto the "root-house."

John Hesler, whose murder in 1883 prompted an extensive investigation but was not solved for another twenty years



While the stone building might have prevented some crime, it still was not a jail. Prosecutor Pierce persisted and, during the economic downturn of 1879, argued that a jail "could be cheaply built by constructing it as a basement for the present court house...Two or three thousand dollars thrown into circulation now in the county, as it would be for such labor and material, would tend greatly to relieve the present stricture and distress..."

Although a worthy public works project, the jail failed to attract the necessary support. Adams County continued to pay several hundred dollars a year to transport prisoners and hold them in Portage. A jail was not built in Friendship until after the village incorporated in 1907. A small frame building was moved to the court house lawn and a steel "cage" installed in it to hold prisoners. The county did not have its own jail until the second court house was completed in 1914.

Despite the many slow sessions of the court and the reluctance of county government to levy taxes for a jail, Adams County was not crime free in the 1800s. Petty theft, larceny, drunkenness, family disputes, fistfights, child abuse, assault, arson, armed robbery, rape, murder and other crimes familiar to the late 20th Century also occurred in the 19th. A few crimes were specific to the time and place, such as timber thievery, arson in marshes and forests, stock rustling, stagecoach hold-ups and violence at hop house dances.

Here is a sampling of crime in Adams County, 1860s-1890s: two thieves were arrested in Friendship for stealing horses from some unarmed Ho-Chunk Indians; the pet sheep belonging to "young Billy Quaw" was snatched off a Friendship street and given a ride in the country before young Billy retrieved it; a "dolt" attempting to burn the old grass off his hay marsh ignited a fire that destroyed nearly every fence in Big Flats and "20 miles of fencing" in Lincoln; a New Haven father-and-son team was convicted of stealing two bushels of clover seed, 25 bushels of oats and 12 bushels of wheat; a Mr. Hosford was relieved of $20 when a highwayman halted the Wisconsin Dells-White Creek stage and ordered all passengers to "stand and deliver"; an arsonist set fire to the barn of John Hill, Friendship, with four-year-old Verna Hill inside; at a hop-pickers dance in Strongs Prairie, John Anderson, "drunk and quarrelsome" knifed and killed Isaac Rusgard. Times change, human nature does not. Crime was a part of life in the past as in the present.

One prominent part of modern county government that did not exist in the 1800s was the highway department. Roads and bridges were the responsibility of town governments, with some aid from the county and the state. The state was

Road day in Big Flats, in the 1900s, when landowners could trade labor on the town roads for property tax relief.

constitutionally barred from building highways and bridges until 1908, but that did not stop Madison from chartering them, only to leave the actual construction work to private contractors or local government.

Towns customarily selected a "road day" in spring, on which taxpayers came together and selected a "Roadmaster." He organized the landowners into work teams which set out to lay logs in "corduroy" fashion on roads crossing marshes, pour more sand into the deepest potholes and grade the highway as best they could. The quality of the work varied, with some Roadmasters and landowners working hard to create reasonably good roads while others treated "road-day" as a paid holiday with the boys. The pay came in the form of a credit on town taxes pro-rated according to the number of men, boys, work horses and wagons an individual landowner contributed.

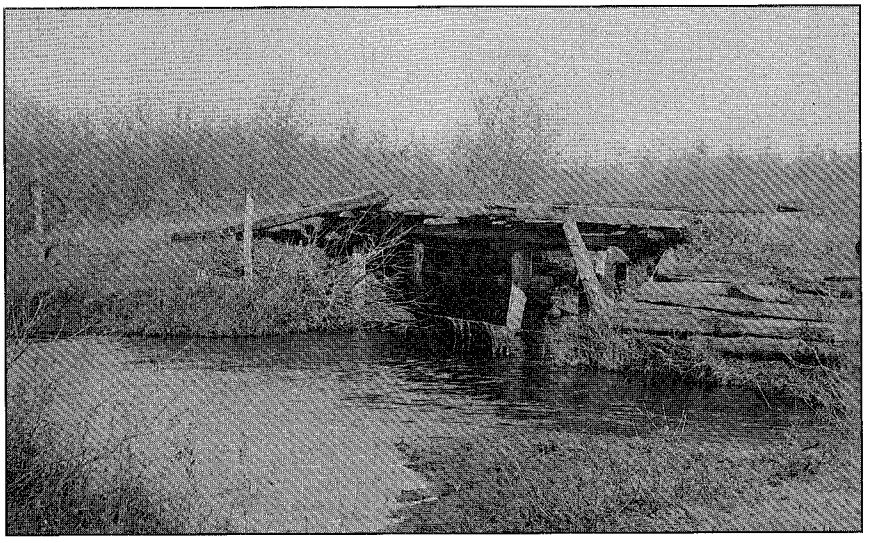
The fifty miles of frontage on the Wisconsin River that Adams shared with Juneau county was one of the longest unbridged stretches on the river. A bridge was in place at Wisconsin Dells in the 1850s and at Nekoosa in the 1870s, but travelers in between depended on fords and ferries.

Ferries were chartered up and down the river at convenient crossing points: Plainville, Point Bluff, Fritz's, Table Rock, Quincy village, Carman's Rock, Petenwell, Strong's Prairie, Barnum. The fee schedule set by the county in 1861, for William Carman's ferry, which crossed the river about where the C & NW railroad bridge was later built, stated that 40 cents was the charge for any vehicle drawn by a team of horses or a yoke of oxen. One horse and wagon was 30 cents; one man on a horse, 25 cents; hogs and sheep were 3 cents per head, and foot passengers were 10 cents each. Operators were also protected by a proviso in the charter that kept competing ferries at least two miles apart from each other.

The watercraft used to ferry people, animals and goods across the river varied. Most were wide, flat-bottomed rafts, slightly longer and wider than a horse and wagon, fastened to a stout rope stretched across the river and using the current itself to propel themselves across--but not always.

Isaac Olesen's "Norwegian ferry" located about one mile down from Petenwell Rock in the 1870s, was a skiff in which Olesen carried people--no animals or wagons--across the river at 10 cents a head.

The ferry that "Captain" Albert Wood ran at Quincy was more imposing. It was a fifty-foot long side-paddle steamboat named the "Modocawanda" that ran from Quincy to Germantown village where the Juneau County Park is now located. In 1873, Wood took the Modocawanda to Wisconsin Dells where it made its mark in the history of tourism as the first steam-powered tour boat to navigate those waters. After a few years at the Dells, the former Quincy ferry steamed to the Fox River to end its days.



Above: Town and county governments shared re-spsonsibility for bridges in the county. ***Below:*** *the dedication of the modern steel bridge at Petenwell Rock, 1919.*

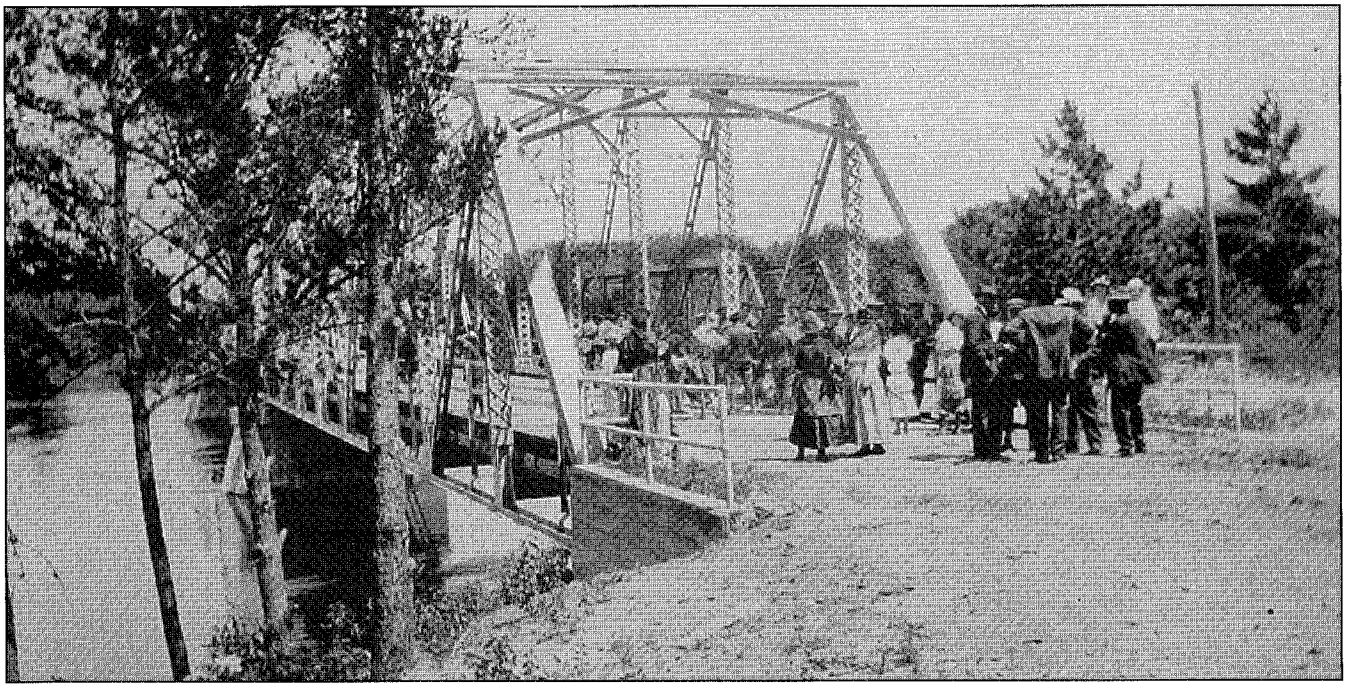
A lively ferry traffic implied a need for bridges, but spanning the Wisconsin was a financial challenge neither Juneau nor Adams County wanted to meet. The ancient Indian crossing at Petenwell Rock was the most likely place to build a bridge. The river was reasonably narrow and the bottom was rock instead of shifting sand. In addition, the village of Necedah entered its golden age as the queen city of the Yellow River pinery in the 1870s. The Necedah Lumber Company had several hundred employees and the village itself grew to 2,000 people by 1890. The Milwaukee Road and the North Western railroads both ran to Necedah and added to the bustle of the place.

In 1882, Necedah's lumbermen built a wooden toll bridge at Petenwell Rock. It was replaced two years later by an iron bridge financed with aid from the Towns of Necedah and Strong's Prairie. Necedah's lumber boom went bust in the early 1890s, and the bridge was taken over by Necedah Town. The contribution of Adams County to these bridge-building endeavors totalled about $150 allotted to Strong's Prairie to improve the roads approaching the bridge. The Petenwell bridge remained the responsibility of the towns until state law was changed in the 1900s.

Bridge-building at Petenwell stimulated interest elsewhere. In 1886 residents of Quincy petitioned the county to build a bridge in their town and the following year Springville and Mauston asked the county for a bridge at Point Bluff. The conviction that even bridges over major rivers should be locally funded prevailed and no county action was taken.

Taxes for bridges and other items were always a concern. Over the years a sampling of county tax statements, not including township taxes, and all based on the property tax, reads as follows:

	1878	1885	1900
State taxes:	**$2504.86**	**$2961.25**	**$3971.81**
County school aids:	**$990.60**	**$986.40**	**$3665.25**
County taxes:	**$8565.75**	**$4716.86**	**$7797.65**
Total	**$12,061.21**	**$8664.51**	**15,434.71**



From Past To Present: The History of Adams County - Link Page

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