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Ghost Towns In Grant County, Wisconsin

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Grant County, Wisconsin, was established by the territorial legislature in 1836, and took its name from an early trapper and fur trader by that name.[1] Grant is believed to have been in the area as early as 1810, although French and English explorers, prospectors, and traders were in the area in the preceding two centuries. Little is known about these early people, but one story about Grant has been handed down through generations.

Grant was known for his hardihood and endurance. His rifle supplied him with food, and his cooking utensil was a brass kettle which was fitted to his head and which he wore under his cap. The Sac and Fox Indians were at war with the Winnebagoes, and Grant was trading with the former, when one day he happened to encounter a war party of the latter. Recognizing him, one Winnebago brave struck Grant on his head with a tomahawk which produced no other effect than a sharp ring from the brass kettle. The brave and his party rapidly retreated crying "Manitou!" (Spirit!). According to tradition, Grant was afterwards regarded with awe by the Indians.[2]

A year after Grant County was established, the county seat was designated at Lancaster, and the process began of dividing the county into towns, as they were called originally, or townships, as they were called later. One of the largest counties in the state of Wisconsin, which became the 30th state in 1848, Grant County comprised, then and now, 1,169 square miles or 737,280 acres. Because of its size, the county was ultimately divided into 33 townships, the last division taking place in 1895.[3]

During the decades from the 1820s to the 1880s, there were founded about 100 named settlements in Grant County. At one time, virtually every crossroads in the county had a settlement of some sort, and those settlements followed the same general pattern of development. After moving out of the "badger holes" used by the early miners, wooden cabins of the rudest sort were built, and finally, but not until the 1830s, stone structures were built. Commercial establishments were built to supply basic needs such as coffee, salt, sugar, tobacco, and whiskey, which were imported from St. Louis, Missouri, via Galena, Illinois. John Hawkins Rountree, one of the founders of Platteville, opened a store in 1828, the first and probably for a time the only one in the area.[4] Blacksmith shops and sawmills were also a necessity. Hotels, or inns, were constructed which accommodated settlers with temporary housing and often provided diverse services.

One indication of a federally recognized settlement was a post office. The first post office in what later became Grant County was located in what was originally called Platte River Diggings. In 1829, John Hawkins Rountree petitioned the federal government for a post office and requested that its location be named Platte River. For several months in 1828 the settlement was named Lebanon, but when permission for a post office was approved, the name became Platteville.[5] Churches and schools, often combined, were built to supply religious and secular education to the growing settlements.

By 1840, the population of the county was 3,926, with 2,474 males and 1,452 females; of the males, almost 1,000 were between the ages of 20 and 30 years, which, as one observer recorded, ". . . indicates a large number of unmated miners and adventurers." Other 1840 census statistics indicate the principal economic interest of the county: there were seventeen smelting furnaces producing annually over six million pounds of lead and providing employment to eighty-six males; there was also an emphasis on agriculture as shown by the considerable production of foodstuffs.[6]

The decades of the 1840s and the 1850s were the critical decades for the survival of dozens of settlements. Declining lead prices, the enticement of California gold, improved methods of communication and transportation, and especially the coming of the railroad, were decisive factors. The first railroad proposed to enter Grant County was the Belmont and Dubuque Railroad, chartered by the territorial legislature in 1836. Like dozens of later railroad proposals, it was not until twenty years later that the first railroad entered the county.[7]

Hardship, privation, and frustration was one part of the life of Grant County pioneers. Optimism for the growth of their settlements, and perhaps dreams of greatness and personal recognition was their life. What of those many settlements which did not survive? In American history and literature, they are the ghost towns. Little is known about most of them; success and triumph more often than not were temporary and short-lived. Many died, barely born. If records were kept of their history, which is not likely in most instances, those records have rarely survived. In addition to the ghost towns are the paper towns, settlements platted on paper which in fact never appeared. Some ghost towns, such as Osceola, at one time an active Mississippi River port about two miles south of Potosi, disappeared through changes in the river's channel. Another factor in tracing ghost towns is that of name changes. Most settlements in Grant County were named after person's names, Indian names, topographical features, or, in some instances, for reasons forgotten through time.

A sampling of nine ghost towns in Grant County will indicate, in part, their origin.[8] Three ghost towns, Paris, Fairplay, and Sinipee, will be dealt with in some detail because more is known about them and they are, perhaps, more interesting.

British Hollow was a mining community in Potosi township settled in 1832 and soon had a population of several hundred residents. A post office, stores, church, school, and brewery were established to supply the surrounding settlements of Dutch Hollow, La Fayette, Rockville, and Van Buren. Originally named Pleasant Valley, the name changed when the miners mistakenly believed that they were in French territory, and according to one story, named the settlement British Hollow because ". . . while the French claim this place, it won't be long before the British have it, and as we are mostly English here, let's call it British Hollow."

Burton was named after its founder, Daniel R. Burt, who built a mill in what was originally called Tafton township, and later renamed Bloomington township. A post office, store, blacksmith shop, church, and school were built around the mill. Burton's recognition came by way of a steamboat constructed here in 1852 and navigated to New Orleans.

Charlotte took its name after the first white child born near Fort Crawford, Wisconsin Territory. The child was named Charlotte Wisconsin Clark by her parents who camped here sometime before 1830. The exact location of the settlement is now unknown, but it was probably on the Mississippi River in what later became Wyalusing township.

Fayette is an example of a paper town because it never existed except on paper. It was planned to be situated at the forks of the Blue River in Moscoda township, but for reasons not known was never built.

Happy Corners in Hazel Green township was named as families in the community met there for socializing and someone supposedly said, "We have such good times here, let's name this place Happy Corners."

Hope, located in Mount Hope township, got its name, according to one story, during a time of agricultural stress, when a local farmer said, "Because we live in hope, the way farmin' is these days, a fellow's got to."

New California in Clifton township apparently got its name at the time of the California gold rush. A mining center, stores were built, and in 1850 a post office was opened which was discontinued in 1855, restored in 1856, and shortly thereafter permanently closed.

Nip and Tuck in Beetown township took its name from a church building project. When the church was being built, the building committee purchased a load of lumber and said that it would have to be enough to do the job. As the church rose, workers began to worry whether or not they would run out of lumber. Someone remarked, "Well, it is sure going to be nip and tuck!"

Slabtown, also in Beetown township, originated in 1857 when a sawmill was erected. According to one source, the name came from the settlement's buildings being roofed with slabs of lumber. Later, the name was changed to Flora Fountain because a combination of wild flowers and underground springs made a sort of fountain. In 1860, the mill was burned and never rebuilt, but Flora Fountain lingered on as Flora when in 1891 a post office was opened which was still in operation in 1900, while the town had virtually disappeared.

The French heritage of Wisconsin is generally well known. What may not be as well known is the Grant County-French association. In 1828, a French-born, or French-Canadian born, adventurer by the name of Martial Detantabaratz came into the area later designated as Grant County. Detantabaratz had a yellowish complexion (malaria?) so was known as "Le Jaune" — The Yellow. He had an ambition to found a settlement, and in 1835 on the west bank of the Platte River, near the confluence of the river, he laid out his town. He built a store, a furnace for ore smelting, and several years later a tavern. In 1839, he built a toll bridge across the Platte River, the first known structure of its sort in Grant County. He named his settlement Paris, probably because of his French heritage.[9]

As Paris began to attract settlers, came trouble. Detantabaratz got into financial difficulties with one of his creditors, David G. Bates, of Galena, Illinois, and a duel threatened. Detantabaratz chose swords as weapons, because according to lore, he had once been a dragoon in the French army. Bates had no experience in sword dueling and withdrew. Nothing is known about any financial agreement, but Detantabaratz's problems apparently did not end, for in 1842 he hanged himself and his infant town also soon perished.[10] It is not known where he is buried.

What remains of the Grant County Paris? Apart from the township name which has been retained to the present, about one-eighth mile south of Dickeyville, Wisconsin, on Highway 61—151 stands a roadhouse which until about 10 years ago was the "Paris Tavern" and since renamed "George and Mary's Rib Hut and Bar." So much for romantic place names! It is the only visible monument to Detantabaratz's dream.

Originally named Hard Town, Fairplay, in Jamestown township, was first settled by John Roddan who built a cabin here in 1838 and went prospecting.[11] His first big strike came in June, 1841, and soon there were hundreds of prospectors in the neighborhood, coming mainly from Galena to the south and Hardscrabble, or, Hazel Green, to the east. Such a sudden influx of many seeking quick fortunes led to charges of claim jumping, a chronic problem in most early mining areas. Bloodshed threatened when one of the miners who had gathered to participate in or to witness the fight cried out, "Let's have fair play here, and render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's!" The crowd echoed "fair play, fair play"; the affair was amicably resolved and the town got a new name.[12]

In the early 1840s a post office was opened, and a number of stores were built. A combination church and school was erected, described by one early writer as a "sort of free-for-all building." Fairplay was incorporated in 1845 and claimed from five to eight hundred residents, depending upon which source one accepts. Optimists believed that it would develop into a major city. Nevertheless, Fairplay retained many of the marks of a frontier settlement. One tavern, "The Lighthouse", was regionally referred to as ". . . the scene of many a high revel and much high betting, interspersed with an occasional knock-down and drag-out."[13] In 1846, another claim-jumping duel threatened. The previously mentioned John Hawkins Rountree was enlisted as one of the seconds. After successful attempts of reconciliation, the duel did not take place, but it is notable as the last known threatened duel in Grant County.[14]

The California gold rush combined with declining mining prospects and ore prices quickly reduced the size of the town. There was a brief revival with new mineral discoveries in 1856, but rapid decline soon followed. Today, one building of old Fairplay remains, the limestone town hall which was built in the 1840s. Until a decade ago, it was still in use as the township meeting hall, and it is recognized as the oldest town hall in Wisconsin.[15] The building has recently been incorporated into a private residence in such a skillful way that much of it can be seen as it was originally.

Sinipee, meaning "lead ore" in one regional Indian dialect, began its brief and somewhat tragic history in 1831 when Payton Vaughn moved with his bride from North Carolina to the eastern bank of the Mississippi River near Sinipee Creek about three miles north of Dunleith (in 1879 renamed East Dubuque), Illinois.[16] Vaughn was interested in exploiting the newly discovered mineral resources, and he soon became aware, as did others who later settled in Sinipee, that they were too dependent upon the monopoly of Dubuque and Galena in shipping, smelting, and supplies. Therefore, in 1836, Vaughn and others formed the Sinipee Company to develop a port and town.

In the same year, the port was started, the town was laid out, and soon Sinipee had a post office, stores, mill, blacksmith shop, and church. Paper currency was also reportedly printed here, the only known instance of this in Grant County.[17] Also in 1836, Vaughn, who had profited from selling land to the Sinipee Company, began construction of a hotel, appropriately named "The Stone House." The hotel, which boasted the finest fixtures in the area, became the center for community affairs. Zachary Taylor, later president of the United States, and Jefferson Davis, later president of the Confederacy, are known to have enjoyed the hospitality of the hotel when stationed about fifty miles upriver at Fort Crawford.[18]

Another famous, but almost forgotten name associated with Sinipee, was Sinipee's first postmaster, John Plumbe, Jr., who had a dream he never lived to see realized.[19] Plumbe emigrated at the age of twelve from Wales to America with his parents, and by 1836 was one of the speculators in the Sinipee Company. He envisioned a plan to connect a railroad from Milwaukee (already connected to Chicago) to Sinipee, across the river to Dubuque, and west to the Oregon Territory.

Obsessed with his idea of a transcontinental railroad, in 1839 Plumbe traveled to Washington, D.C., to lobby in behalf of his cause. While there, he learned of a new French invention called the daguerreotype, one of the earliest forms of photography. The following year, 1840, he set up photography shops in New York and Boston. (Matthew Brady, later the famous Civil War photographer, opened his first studio in New York in 1844.) Plumbe sold his eastern businesses in 1849, and moved to California, still pursuing his elusive dream. Apparently he had business failure in California, because he returned to Dubuque in 1856 a broken man. He committed suicide in 1857, and was buried in his family's plot in Dubuque's Linwood Cemetery in an unmarked grave.

But Plumbe's story does not end here. At a flea market in San Francisco, California, in 1972, an 1846 daguerreotype of the U. S. Capitol was sold for $8. In 1978, this same photograph, by then authenticated to have been taken by Plumbe or by one of his assistants, sold for $14,000 to an American collector. It is one of the two earliest known photographs of the U. S. Capitol. Plumbe also received recognition when in 1977 a monument in his honor was erected in Linwood Cemetery. The monument reads "John Plumbe, Jr., 1809—1857; Pioneer Photographer; Early Settler of Dubuque; Father of U. S. Transcontinental R. R."

Sinipee continued to prosper and optimists believed that it would surpass Dubuque, Galena, and, perhaps, Chicago and St. Louis. As many as sixteen steamboats and forty teams of oxen were seen at one time loading or discharging freight at the port of Sinipee. Choice building lots sold for $2,000, and revelries continued at "The Stone House." But Sinipee was doomed when in 1839 came early spring thaws and heavy rains which did much structural damage. Worse soon came when stagnant pools of water attracted mosquitoes, and with mosquitoes came malaria. Sinipee rapidly became a ghost town with death and evacuation, but the original Vaughn family survived and remained. Payton Vaughn died in 1845, and his wife remarried a man named Fenley whose descendants remained in Sinipee within this past decade.[20]

Today, Sinipee is marked by the ruined foundation of the once splendid "The Stone House", and a cemetery with about 75 graves, several of which are marked by time-worn headstones. Perhaps the origin, the brief history, and the fate of Sinipee best represents the ghost towns of Grant County, Wisconsin.

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FOOTNOTES

1. The most complete Grant County histories are by John G. Gregory (Editor), *Southwestern Wisconsin: A History of Old Crawford County,* Four Volumes (Chicago: The S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1932), and Castello N. Holford, *History of Grant County Wisconsin* (Lancaster: The Teller Print, 1900).

2. Holford, 8-9.

3. Statistical information supplied by letter 24 September 1981 by Richard Markus, Chairman of the Grant County Board of Supervisors, Potosi, Wisconsin.

4. Holford, 454.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.,* 46.

7. *The Platteville Journal,* 9 September 1936, 6.

8. Much of the following information about the nine settlements is from Robert E. Gard and L. G. Sorden, *Romance of Wisconsin Place Names* (New York: October House Inc., 1968).

9. Holford, *op. cit.,* 763-764. It has been suggested that Detantabaratz named his settlement Paris in hopes that Charles X, king of France from 1824 to 1830, and deposed in the latter year, might be persuaded to "rule" over a Grant County Paris. This seems unlikely in that Detantabaratz's Paris was laid out in 1835, and he was probably ignorant of events in France.

10. *Ibid.,* 764.

11. Eliza Ann Sparks Buell, *Of Fair Play (sic.) in the Seventies,* 1956. No place or publisher is given; from the archives of the Grant County Historical Society, Cunningham Museum, Platteville, Wisconsin. W. B. Colburn, *The Jamestown Mine,* 1856. No place or publisher is given; from the archives of the Grant County Historical Society, Cunningham Museum, Platteville, Wisconsin.

12. *The Telegraph-Herald,* 19 October 1959, 29. *The Platteville Journal,* 16 April 1964, 7.

13. Holford, *op. cit.,* 592.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *The Telegraph Herald, op. cit. The Platteville Journal, op. cit.*

16. The most complete studies on Sinipee are by William F. Stark, *Ghost Towns of Wisconsin* (Sheboygan: Zimmermann Press, 1977), 9-15, and Nellie M. Stanton, *The History of Sinnipee (sic.) and the Vaughn Family.* No date, place or publisher is given; from the archives of the Grant County Historical Society, Cunningham Museum, Platteville, Wisconsin. See also *The Fennimore Times,* 5 October 1927, 1.

17. From a documentary fragment in the archives of the Grant County Historical Society, Cunningham Museum, Platteville, Wisconsin. No date, place, or publisher is given on the fragment. Local people claim to have seen Sinipee currency.

18. Stanton, *op. cit.*

19. Much of the information about John Plumbe, Jr., is from *The Telegraph-Herald,* 30 July 1978, 20.

20. Stanton, *op. cit.*