

Note: This is an excerpt from a much longer article by Maria Powell. Most of the information and quotations came from Madison: A History of the Formative Years, 2nd Edition (2003), by David M. Mollenhoff, but for ease of reading I took out most footnotes and citations. If you are interested in them, please contact me at mariapowell@mejo.us.

Madison was founded in genocide and environmental injustice

The Ho Chunk people lived on the beautiful and bountiful land that became Madison for thousands of years before the city was founded. They called the four lakes area, where their ancestors built a large number of geometric and animal-shaped effigy mounds, “Taychopera.” The land and waters of Taychopera were sacred to them.

Tragically for the Ho Chunk, the U.S. government and eastern speculators, lead miners, and farmers also desired what Madison and surrounding areas had to offer. A month after the Black Hawk War, U.S. government authorities demanded that Ho Chunk cede their lands south of the Wisconsin River and north of the Rock River, which included the four lakes regions. According to this agreement, no Ho Chunk could legally reside in this area after June 1, 1833. In 1836, Madison was chosen as capital of the Wisconsin Territory,¹ and in 1837 U.S. authorities gave remaining Ho Chunk in Wisconsin eight months to move to land in northern Minnesota. Many Ho Chunk people left the area, but others refused.²

In 1874, the U.S. government rounded up a thousand Ho Chunk remaining in Wisconsin, forced them at gunpoint into boxcars, and shipped them to the Nebraska Ho Chunk reservation. Showing remarkable courage and endurance, many returned to Wisconsin—the “renegades” or “rebel faction” who are the ancestors of the Ho Chunk living in Madison and their Nation’s headquarters in Black River Falls now.

Privileged Madison’s beginnings

Shortly after the Black Hawk War, even while a number of Ho Chunk still lived in the area, townships around Madison were placed on sale in Green Bay in 1835. Most of them were purchased by wealthy investors from the east for speculative purposes.”

James Doty was one of these wealthy investors. Born and raised in New York State, Doty eventually became a land agent for John Jacob Astor of the American Fur Company, one of the richest men in the country. In 1836, with resources and support from Astor, he purchased several key areas on the isthmus between Third and Fourth Lakes, including the area where the capitol now stands. He quickly laid out the town’s lots and streets and named the area Madison after revered President James Madison, who had recently died.

Doty had a “network of influential friends” in Washington D.C. and worked hard to assure that Madison would be selected as the territorial capital and home of the university. With his Madison design laid out and mapped, Doty sold lots in the areas around the capitol “to as many

¹ The Wisconsin territory at the time included Iowa, Minnesota, and the eastern half of the Dakotas

² Many of the Ho Chunk who went to Minnesota were later asked by the U.S. government to move elsewhere in Minnesota, after which many took refuge with the Omaha tribe in Nebraska. In an 1865 treaty, the Ho Chunk purchased part of the Omaha reservation.

influential persons as he could so that each had a financial interest in seeing the seat of government remain in Madison.” Madison was chosen as the territorial capital in 1836, and shortly after this Doty created a 900-acre “Western Addition” to Madison, which platted the university along a ridge on Lake Mendota, dubbed “College Hill.”

In 1848, Wisconsin was admitted as the thirtieth state and Madison was made its permanent capital. In 1849, the Wisconsin legislature approved the purchase of 157 acres of land from Vanderpoel for the University of Wisconsin, which began operating shortly after that. The newly-formed board of regents subdivided and sold some of the acres to fund the growth of the university. Madison was incorporated as a city in 1856.