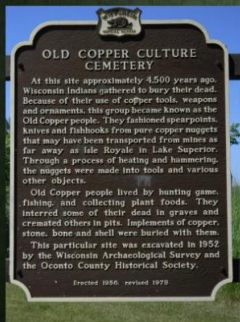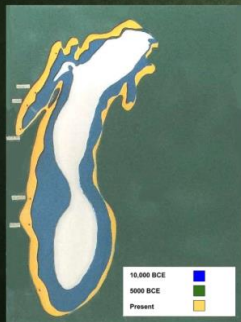The City of Oconto 150th Celebration

Today we're celebrating the 150th anniversary of the incorporation of the city of Oconto. But what would become the city began long before March 11, 1869.

Copper Culture State Park

Early Native Americans, known as the Old Copper Complex, lived in this area about 5000 years ago. Evidence of their lives was found at what is now Copper Culture State Park west of Oconto.

Map of Green Bay Shoreline

This map shows how the shoreline of Green Bay has changed over the millennia. The blue line is the shoreline about 10,000 years ago, the green line is about 5000 years ago, and the yellow line is the present. So, at the time the Copper Complex was here it was at the edge of the bay and where we are today was under water.

Typical dwelling for Native Americans

After the Copper Complex disappeared the Menominee Tribe became dominant in this area more than 1000 years ago. They had a settlement along the Oconto River between Superior Avenue and Park Avenue. This is a what the dwellings of that time might have looked like.

St Francis Xavier Mission Established by Father Allouez 1669

In 1669 Father Claude Allouez founded the first mission in northeastern Wisconsin at the present-day city of Oconto and named it St. Francis Xavier Mission. An estimated 600 Native Americans lived in the nearby village of "Oak-a-toe" now Oconto.

Map of Northwest Territory

In 1787 Oconto was part of the Northwest Territory of the new United States of America through the Treaty of Paris.

Oconto County 1852

Wisconsin became a state in 1848. Oconto County was formed in 1851 from the northern part of Brown County becoming one of the largest counties. The yellow area on this 1852 map shows the boundaries.
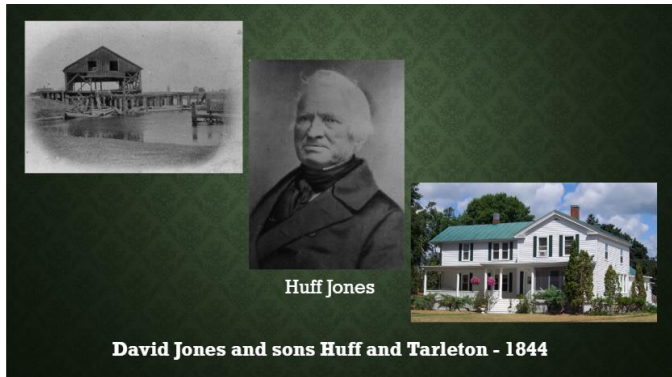

1871 Bird's Eye View

This bird's-eye view map created in 1871 shows an overall view just two years after becoming a city. It shows how four distinct areas of town had developed. This resulted in duplicate street names including two Main Streets and four sets of numbered streets. However, in 1869 they joined together to become a city.

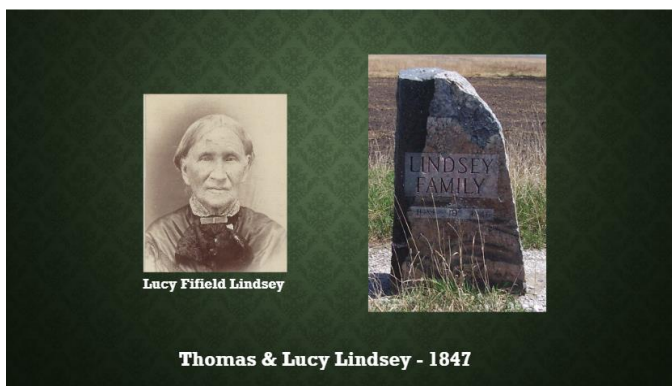
View from Courthouse - late 1860s

Of course, Oconto looked very different then than it does now. It has gradually and continually changed from the beginning settlement to today. The earliest pictures we have of Oconto were taken in the late 1860s from the first courthouse located on the southeast corner of Collins Avenue and First Street. You can see the first Presbyterian Church on Main Street. This courthouse is probably where the city would have had any formal gathering for the incorporation. The people who attended had been settling the area for about 20 years.

Huff Jones

David Jones and sons Huff and Tarleton - 1844

Lumbering is what first brought settlers to the Oconto area. The Arndt Mill was the first built in 1827 in Pensaukee. The first successful mill in Oconto was built in 1844 by David Jones and his sons Huff and Tarleton at what is now known as Susie's Hill. Huff later built a home in 1851 at 1345 Main Street, one of the oldest houses in town. It was here that the first election was held. Documents from that election were found in the house. In 1862 the Holt Lumber Company began operations in Oconto.

Lucy Fifield Lindsey
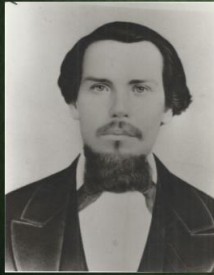
Thomas & Lucy Lindsey - 1847

The first family to settle permanently in Oconto was the Thomas and Lucy Lindsey family who built an "over-night place" near the mouth of the Oconto River in 1847. Thomas died in 1852 but Lucy carried on running a boarding house and raising their seven children. Three of their daughters became prominent members of Oconto society.

Thomas & Lovina (Lindsey) Millidge **Charles & Almeda (Lindsey) Pendleton** **Charles & Libbie (Lindsey) Hall**

Main Street & Millidge Avenue **567 Main Street - 1880** **543 Main Street - 1878**

Lovina married Thomas Millidge, a merchant who had the first general store. Their home, built by Uri Balcom, was the first meeting place for the Christian Science Church. It later was the Kriewaldt Glove Company. Almeda married Charles Pendleton who was a successful lumber baron. They later moved to Washington to establish a lumber business there. Libbie married Charles Hall, a prominent merchant. He also built the Music Hall with an auditorium that was the cultural center of the community.

Peter & Angelique Pecor - 1849

Peter Pecor came to Oconto about 1849 and bought land in the area we now call Frenchtown. He married Angelique Courchaine, a Native American woman. Peter laid out the area and sold blocks to families settling in the community. He gave land for St Peter's Church and cemetery and for a school. His name is perpetuated by Pecor Street and Pecor Point as well as numerous descendants.
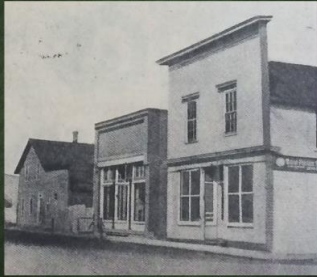

610 Main Street - 1868

William Brunquest - 1849

William Brunquest came to Oconto in 1849. He was involved with the mills but then had a general store. The family later moved to Menominee. He was the Village President in 1861, the first County Treasurer, and clerk of the County Board. He also built what we call the Scofield Mansion in 1868.

Edwin & Eliza Hart - 1850

Edwin and Eliza Hart arrived about 1850. Edwin starting in lumbering but then got into the mercantile and shipping business. He became active in the community early on presiding at funerals and establishing the first school. He conducted the 1855 Wisconsin census for Oconto, finding 115 citizens. Their son, Cyrus, built the first brick home in the county in 1866.

Brazeau Brothers Store - 1870

Samuel & Zoe Brazeau - 1855

Samuel Brazeau and his new bride, Zoe Reindeau, settled here in 1855. Samuel started at the Spies water mill, moved to logging, and in 1870 opened the Brazeau general store with his newly arrived brother F.X. Brazeau.

George Beyer - 1856

George Beyer came with his father in 1856. Even with little formal education he was able to become a leading entrepreneur in the area, being involved with banking, utilities, railroads, lumbering, and real estate. He and his wife, Fannie, bought the home constructed by Cyrus Hart which later became the Beyer Home Museum.

Oconto Brewery - 1858

Louis & Margaret Pahl - 1858

Louis Pahl and Anton Links established the Oconto Brewery in 1858. A few years later the partnership dissolved and Pahl continued on his own. Arriving in the US with $2.50 in 1854, he developed his business into $15,000 to $20,000 a year by 1881. As a prominent businessman Pahl also was involved with politics. He was a Town Supervisor, 3 term City Treasurer, 1 term state Assemblyman, and had many terms as a County Board Supervisor.
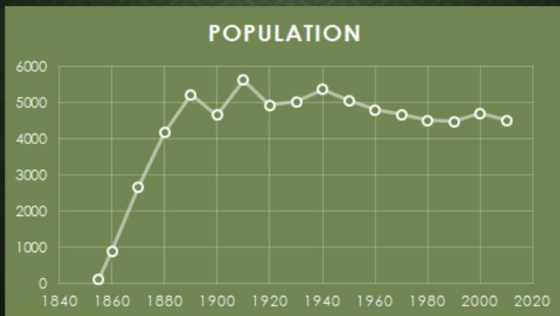
211 McDonald Street

George & Charlotte Smith - 1860

George Smith came on the Oconto River in 1848 building a sawmill at Leightown with his brother-in-law. In 1860 he moved to the city of Oconto to build a sawmill but soon decided that there were greater opportunities in lumber jobbing. By the time Oconto was becoming a city, George was well established as a businessman and prominent citizen. He was elected as the new city's first mayor and handled the position so well that he was elected again for a second term.

These and other first families, along with all the workers in the lumbering industry and supporting businesses, steadily increased the population. By 1859 Oconto had the required 150 citizens to be incorporated as a village. It only took ten years for the community to pass the 1000 citizen mark to incorporate as the City of Oconto on March 11, 1869, two hundred years after the first white men landed at the Oconto River harbor. By 1880 the population had passed 4000, then remained roughly between 4500 and 5000 for the next 100 years with the highest population in 1910 at 5600.

In 1919 the city recognized the 50th anniversary of the city with a smaller ceremony incorporated into a larger ceremony welcoming home soldiers from World War I. In 1969 the city combined the 100th anniversary of the city with the 300th anniversary of the first landing and celebrated all summer with various events. Today we celebrate 150 years of coming together as a community. As happened 50 years ago there are many events planned for the year.