

History of Jefferson County, WI

Jefferson County, Wisconsin is located in the southeastern part of the state, made up of 528 sq. miles, midway between the urban areas of Madison and Milwaukee. The county's landscape was formed by glaciers creating rolling hills and winding waterways as they passed over the area. The waterways and tributaries of the county including the Rock, Crawfish, Bark, Maunasha, and Scuppernong Rivers were contributing factors to making this area fertile, lush and filled with wildlife attracting indigenous cultures dating as early as the 11th Century as well as early settlers in the 1830's.

Jefferson County's history is rich and deep. It was the location of one of the earliest Mississippian Indigenous Civilizations in Wisconsin at what is now known as Aztalan, the site of more than 1500 mounds from the Indigenous Cultures, early European trade routes, and the dark days of the Black Hawk War in 1832. The Black Hawk War was notably the last stand for indigenous people in the Northwest Territories and after the end of the war, there with the influx of pioneer settlers in 1836 to the county. At that time the Wisconsin area became its own territory breaking off from Michigan and at the same time Jefferson County broke away from Milwaukee County, in 1839 it was recognized as a separate County by the territorial legislature and was provided its own County Government. By the 1840's the last remaining tribes in the county were forcibly removed and by the 1870's the sight of indigenous people within the county was a rarity.

Jefferson County was named after Jefferson County, New York a location some of the early notable settlers came from including Judge Hyer and James, Peter and Patrick Rogan among others.

The County seat was petitioned for in 1837 to be at the point where the Rock and Crawfish Rivers met, present day City of Jefferson. Early settlers were mostly small farmers who sought out land with prairie and woodlands with a possible source of water, which would provide building materials for homesteads and essential needs. Settlers worked together and slowly formed communities, bringing with them various types of worship, social and cultural diversity, as well as the need for places of education and to gather.

The earliest school was located in Aztalan, a location of an important crossroads of travel routes east to west and north and south. As more settlers moved into the county, several one room schoolhouses sprang up and were used until schools were consolidated in the 1950's.

As communities grew and changed so did the structures they used. Log cabins were replaced by brick or wood framed structures. Saw and flour mills cropped up to serve the needs of a growing population and businesses such as general stores, blacksmiths, wagon makers, etc. also became staples within the communities.

The dominant focus in the county would always be agriculture, from small farms, cheese making, creameries, growing grains in particular wheat in the earliest years, animal husbandry and the focus to improve the agricultural businesses through innovative thinking and methods.

After wheat as a commodity failed due to disease and pests, the county farmers turned to the leadership of a visionary young dairy farmer, William Dempster Hoard, future State Governor, and six other dairymen formed the Wisconsin Dairymen's Association and became an advocate for small dairy farmers in the state and through the publication "Hoard's Dairyman" educated farmers throughout the state and nation with current trends, advancements in the industry and shared Wisconsin's contribution to the dairy industry bringing it to the attention of world which continues today.

In the 1840's German and Irish settlers arrived and formed new towns along with other ethnic groups. A stage coach line cut through Jefferson County bringing more people as they moved westward. Roads were established including plank roads in the 1850's and eventually the railroad by the 1860's which either would make or break several towns depending on their routes, Aztalan which had been petitioned to be the state capital and lost by one vote to Madison in 1839, was bypassed by the railroad in 1859 and the once flourishing community became nothing more than a quiet crossroads.

Jefferson County was not immune to the nation-wide depression of 1857, forcing to close many businesses, bankrupt railroads and causing investors and bond holders to lose their great fortunes.

In the 1860's the Civil War called the men of Jefferson Co. to arms like so many others in the nation. Jefferson County had Volunteer Companies which sent hundreds of men to the war. This was one of several wars in which residents were called to arms; from the Mexican War of 1847 through to the Gulf War of 1990's to the War on Afghanistan in the 2000's.

The turn of the 20th Century brought many changes in our mostly rural county. Dirt and plank roads were paved, the use of horse and wagon made way for automobiles. Candlelight, hand pumps, wells and outdoor facilities were replaced by electricity and modern day plumbing within the homes and businesses, making life easier. Jefferson County was experiencing the growth from a prosperous time like so many other regions of our country after the Great Depression and World Wars, in particular WWII which launched us into a new age of global power, industry, new freedoms; including a push for civil rights, women's rights and cultural changes. Jefferson County remains a rural landscape dotted with cities, villages and towns. Agriculture and industry are mainstays within the communities as they continue to grow into the 21st Century.

Summary of information taken from: "A Brief History of Jefferson County, It's Towns, Villages and Cities" by William F. Jannke III

Words for boosting searches:

Historic, History, Historical, Museum(s), Society, Preservation, Registry (?), Octagon House, Aztalan, Native American, indigenous, pioneer, settlements, 1800's(?), Blackhawk, Timothy Johnson, Judge Hyer, Increase Lapham, (other names of early communities?), Mississippian, Culture, heritage, Civil War, WWII, WWI, Koshkonong, artifacts, mounds, railroads, mills, Hoard,