Figure 10-1. The City of Four Lakes, located on a map of Wisconsin depicting the Mississippi, Wisconsin, and Fox Waterways.
CHAPTER 10:  
THE CITY OF THE FOUR LAKES

For land speculators operating in the Wisconsin Territory of the mid-1830's, few legislative issues could compare with the significance of the selection of the territorial capital. The promoters of over twenty fledgling villages and speculative "paper towns" knew that any townsite selected as the capital would become an immediate boom town and speculators dream. Territorial government monies would pour in to acquire lands, build buildings and construct roads leading to the new capital. Settlers and eastern investors would quickly purchase hundreds, if not thousands of lots based on the assumption that land in any town chosen capital would soar in value and be a sound long term investment. It was with these riches in mind that the City of the Four Lakes was platted. Land for the townsite was purchased in August of 1835 from the Green Bay land office by the register of that office, Colonel William B. Slaughter.¹ Slaughter, a resident of Green Bay, was an acquaintance of J.D. Doty and was certainly aware of the skills that Doty had demonstrated as the agent in the platting and sale of lands at Astor (Green Bay). With the conditions that Doty would lay out a townsite and have necessary survey work executed, Slaughter conveyed to Doty a third share in the Four lakes property.
Figure 10-2. Landscape sketch of the area around Four Lakes, as it appeared around the mid-nineteenth century. Drawing by Adolf Hoeffler, State Historical Society of Wisconsin.
Doty knew that the Four Lakes region held promise for townsite speculation. During the Blackhawk War, for example, hundreds of white soldiers had seen the Four Lakes region, and its mysterious oak forests and pastoral prairies had been richly described in several east coast newspaper accounts. This publicity and awareness would certainly benefit any potential Four Lakes townsite developer. And by the end of 1835 settlers had excellent access to this region, largely due to the efforts of Doty himself in the layout and subsequent construction of the military road from Fort Howard in Green Bay to Fort Crawford in Prairie du Chien. Nearly touching Lake Mendota at its northern edge, the road would mean safety from Indians and easy access to a booming trade route for any new city in the lake region. In addition, a nearby canal was being contemplated that would connect the Wisconsin and Rock Rivers, placing the new city near yet another promising trade route.
Figure 10-3. Plat of the City of Four Lakes, Wisconsin: ca. 1836. State Historical Society of Wisconsin.
The plan which Doty developed in the summer of 1836 is a simple but elegant scheme. Doty’s design begins with the euclidean grid which had been imposed upon southern Wisconsin during the federal survey of the territory conducted from 1833-1835. This grid collides with the serpentine shoreline of Lake Mendota to the South, terminating every north-south street in the city with a vista of water. Into this regular and practical grid Doty inserts five public spaces which serve to transform the featureless grid into a city of unique character. First, Doty takes the central north-south street of the grid (Dodge Street), and widens it to become a "highway" which would extend North to intersect the Fort Crawford - Fort Howard Military road connecting the city with the territory. By this simple act Doty determines the most important commercial street in his plan, as businesses would surely have lined this important road to take advantage of the activity along its length. On this road Doty then places the most important element of the plan, the site for the territorial capital (Capital Square). The square sits on axis with Dodge Street and an edifice, built in the square, would have terminated the vista of any visitor arriving from the north by means of the military road. Likewise the capital would have been an impressive sight when seen up Dodge Street from Lake Mendota. The Dodge Street-Capital Square axis has the effect of dividing the city into two areas, a subdivision that Doty recognizes by providing each of the two neighborhoods with its own central square: Hickory Square and Oak Square. With parklike names that describe his intentions, Doty positions these spaces as simple missing city blocks. As they do not interrupt the grid as does Capital Square, these squares are recessive as opposed to the dominance of the capital. In order to take best advantage of the insertion of these public amenities, Doty alters the design of the city blocks to the east and west of each square. By altering the lot subdivisions, twenty-four as opposed to sixteen lots can front on each space. Finally, a twisting and winding street, Lake Street, runs parallel to the Mendota shore. This street serves to smoothly join grid and irregular waters edge and would have given this segment of the city unique character derived from natural shapes.
The townsite was drawn by Doty in the summer of 1836 and was surveyed in time to be presented to the Territorial Legislature for consideration as a potential capital site in the 1836-1837 session. Strangely, a lobbyist that had been hired to sell the charms of the new townsite failed to reach the legislative session, and the dream of the City of Four Lakes as the new territorial capital died in a six to seven vote. Doty, who was present at the legislative session, was there to promote yet another townsite located in the four lakes region and apparently did not speak to the issue. As at least five of the cities up for consideration had been developed by Doty, he could hardly have promoted them all. The failure of the City of Four Lakes to win the title of capital was the death knell for the young townsite.

Madison, the successful capital, was located just five miles away across lake Mendota, and with two sites so close together in the wilderness only one would survive. Even an effort to establish a University of the Territory of Wisconsin in the City of Four Lakes failed, with the university and its development riches eventually settling in nearby Madison. While a few houses were built along the imaginary streets by 1843 the property was again taxed as farmland, and the City of Four Lakes ceased to be.