Figure 2-1. Prairie du Chien, located on a map of Wisconsin depicting the Fox, Mississippi, and Wisconsin Waterways.
CHAPTER 2:
THE PLAN FOR PRAIRIE DU CHIEN

In the spring of 1823, the young James Duane Doty received an appointment as a federal judge for the Western Michigan Territory from President James Monroe. With the rather awkward title of "Circuit Court Judge of the United States for the Counties of Mackinaw, Brown, and Crawford", Doty became a traveling judge with required appearances at seats in all three counties. And so in August of 1823, Doty stepped out of a fur traders canoe to find himself in the bustling village of Prairie du Chien on the great Mississippi River. Although only twenty-three years old at the time, Doty was treated like a respected federal official upon his arrival in the rather rough fur trading settlement. For his salary Judge Doty presided over the first election of a public official, the post office, various legal disputes and land claim affidavits.\(^1\) A fundamental problem of settlement and of development in general on the frontier was the lack of adequate titles or deeds for property. In order for squatters to secure title to their informal land claims, settlers and traders had to testify before Doty claiming long term residency. Doty made his recommendations and then sent the testimonials east for recognition or denial of the land claims. While Doty's salary for this work was adequate, he had desires for wealth and power far beyond his means as a circuit judge. It could not have been long before his duties taught him what wealth and power meant on the frontier: the control of land and its development.
Figure 2-2. Plan of Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin: ca. 1820. The French "long lots" are composed of narrow strips of land extending from river to bluff. Dovy purchased lots thirty-four and thirty-five.
During the winter of 1823-24, Judge Doty purchased what were probably the best building sites at Prairie du Chien for the sum of $130. Located in the prairie near both the fort and the village, Doty's land was surmounted by three large mounds, probably of Indian making. At the time of Doty's purchase, Prairie du Chien was a small cluster of crude buildings, not at all representative of its great importance in trade, frontier expansion and military control. Near the village stood Fort Crawford, a log structure with a stockaded enclosure.\(^2\) The fort, erected to guard against foreign aggression and Indian hostility, was a significant force in the development of the region and served to make nearby property of considerable value. While Doty's land purchase seemed certain to be a sound long-term investment, he endeavored to quickly increase the value of his holdings in a direct and somewhat unscrupulous maneuver. Relying on his official relationship with Governor Cass in Detroit, Doty obtained an act of the Territorial Legislature requiring that the courthouse of Crawford County be built on the land he had just purchased. He then most generously donated to Crawford County a small portion of his land, on which the county was to build the courthouse (and other government structures).\(^3\) Doty's goal was to vastly increase the value of his own property by seeing that the most significant public buildings in the city would be built in the middle of his holdings. His intention was to plat a village around this new courthouse and make a fortune in the sale of the lots.
Figure 2-3. Doty's plan for a courthouse square at Prairie du Chien: 1824. State Historical Society of Wisconsin.
Despite the questionable ethics involved in Judge Doty's land deal, his design is of considerable interest and value. Rather than simply giving a parcel to the county, Doty has made certain provisions concerning the layout of streets, open space and buildings. Foremost, he has configured the area around the three mounds into the form of a courthouse square, surrounded by streets and blocks for public buildings. Doty has then shaped the courthouse square into the form of an arrow, a directional figure which gestures or points towards the great Mississippi below. The three preexisting mounds, the tallest in the center, determine the axis of symmetry for the scheme, and are captured within the confines of the square. The axis of symmetry created by these mounds is of great significance to Doty, as he goes so far as to state in his deed to the county that:

"...the County Commissioners are hereby required to erect the courthouse upon the highest or center mound of the said three mounds..."

In this way Doty intended to transform the tallest of the mounds into a plinth or base intended to lift the courthouse up above the structures of the village below. Doty's courthouse was to sit in the center of a large green or square, a concept derived from Woodward's siting of public structures at Detroit. In addition, Doty had lived in Detroit only a block away from one of Woodward's squares, the green of which contained a small public building. This square was also quite similar in shape to Doty's Prairie du Chien square and may have been the seed of the idea.
Figure 2-4. Detail of Doty's plan for a courthouse square and highway at Prairie du Chien: 1824.
The axis created by the tallest of the three mounds and the courthouse square is then extended directly off the map to the east and labeled a "Public highway". This sketch is evidence that as early as 1824, Doty had envisioned a highway which would connect Prairie du Chien with the interior of the territory, a project that he was destined to complete. Altogether, Doty's scheme is one of remarkable power and is evidence of great skills as a designer and politician. For the cost of $130 and a few communications to Detroit, Doty had set in motion the wheels of a scheme capable of entirely remaking the rustic village of Prairie du Chien into a powerful composition of symmetry, order, monumentality and vision. Unfortunately, by 1829 Crawford County had not utilized the gift of land for the construction of a courthouse. As a result, Doty withdrew his gift and deeded the property to the federal government. Eventually the Army utilized the property for the relocation of Fort Crawford, which had been plagued by flooding. While the Fort was located on the site that Doty had selected for the courthouse, his overall scheme was not used.