Figure 4-1. Route of the Military Road, located on a map of Wisconsin depicting the Fox, Mississippi, and Wisconsin Waterways.
CHAPTER 4:  
THE MILITARY ROAD

By 1826, Doty's work as a traveling circuit judge had made him well aware of the primitive state of transportation on the frontier. In order to maintain his required annual court appearances at Prairie du Chien, Green Bay, and Mackinac, Doty had to travel these distances by means of canoe and overland portages. Far from the idyllic means of recreation one might imagine, this mode of travel was arduous and exhausting at best. Doty usually travelled with fur traders, and timed his journeys to coincide with the seasonal migrations of the traders from trapping grounds to places of winter residence. On the voyage from Prairie du Chien to Green Bay, for example, three separate portages were required. Each time, travelers had to completely unload the boats, carry the supplies ahead to navigable water, return to shoulder the large canoes, repack the vessels and paddle to the next portage. If this system were not primitive enough, it was also subject to the seasons, which served to completely halt travel during the winter months when the rivers were partially or entirely frozen. The winter blockage of transport created not only an inconvenience, but a real danger to inhabitants of the frontier. On several occasions, both settlers and troops at frozen villages and forts had suffered malnutrition and even near starvation before spring thaws had allowed the arrival of provisions. In addition, Indian unrest was a real and present frontier danger in the 1820's and 30's and military forts that went without supplies for nearly six months a year made this problem all the more serious. The reliance on water travel for troop movements also meant that forces could not be effectively utilized during the winter to suppress Indian actions, leaving forts individual islands with little connection to the outside world.
Figure 4-2. Doty's plan of the Fox River Valley, with a proposed military roadway route with terminations in Prairie du Chien and Chicago: ca. 1829. National Archives.
After several court circuits of strenuous and seasonally limited water travel, it was clear to Doty that a superior transportation system needed to be developed if the territory (not to mention his own investments) were to develop and thrive. Around the time of the December 1826 freeze-up, Doty took a first step at rectifying these deficiencies. Writing from the newly platted Village of Munnomonee near Fort Howard at Green Bay (which existed almost entirely on paper) Doty penned a letter to the Honorable A.E. Wing, Delegate at the federal capital in Washington:

"I take the liberty of addressing you upon a subject highly interesting to the people of this country... and to the General Government - I mean, the construction of a military road by the Troops at this post, from this place to Chicago... I give you the following, as the most eligible rout (sic) for a road, according to the best information which I have obtained, to-wit: Commencing at the village of Munnomonee (the seat of justice of the county) and following the ridge which divides the waters of Two Rivers and Manitoowauk; from those which empty into the Fox River, to the head of the bay in Winnebago Lake near the outlet of the lake; then along the shore of that lake to the mouth of Rush River at the head of the lake. From this point I think it would be most advisable to take nearly a direct course to Chicago... The distance would be less than one hundred and eighty miles; and the work could probably be performed in one season... From the southern extremity of Lake Winnebago a rout might readily be traced to Prairie du Chien, or the lead mines at Fever River, either of which would be of greatest utility... The rout which I have marked will be found to run chiefly through oak plains and prairies - the principal expense therefore will be in erecting bridges across the streams..."
Figure 4.3. Diagram of the military road, with Doty's proposed terminations in Prairie du Chien (lower left) and Munnomonee (upper right).
While Doty is certainly operating with some public good will in mind when requesting the construction of the roadways, he has attempted to enhance the value of his two developments (Munnomonee and Prairie du Chien) by requesting that these important military roadways be built connecting them.2 While the roads were intended primarily for military purposes, they would obviously have enormous economic impact upon the settlement and economic growth of lands opened by the roads.3 Doty recognized this potential, and sought to bestow such benefits upon the future owners of his property. Returning to the plan of Doty’s courthouse square at Prairie du Chien, the proposed "public highway" entering the square from the east demonstrates that Doty was thinking of such a road as early as 1824; and had utilized it as an important feature in his scheme by terminating the highway with the courthouse square. One can imagine traveling through what was essentially wilderness, to arrive at Prairie du Chien and run headlong into an impressive vista of a new courthouse sitting in the center of a great public square. It would have been a monumental and powerful western termination to the military road and would have made nearby lots extremely valuable. The 1826 plan of Munnomonee also suggests such forethought, as it too features a great square, which would certainly have received the Green Bay termination if Doty had been able to control this matter in 1826. But Doty’s plan for linking Green Bay and Prairie du Chien with a military road was not to transpire for several years. As we have seen, both of the plats (Prairie du Chien and Munnomonee) were essentially failures in development terms and by the time the road was built in the 1830’s, Doty had other development interests.
Throughout the late 1820's, Doty continued to lobby for the construction of the road, his proposals becoming sharper and clearer over time as his knowledge of the region grew. After tiring of the system of canoe and portage travel, Doty had begun to travel legs of his court circuit overland on horseback. In 1829, he traveled the route that he had proposed for the Green Bay - Prairie du Chien road entirely overland, becoming one of the first white men to have done so. Departing from Green Bay, Doty crossed the Fond du Lac River at the head of Lake Winnebago, passed through the Four Lakes region near the future site of Madison, and arrived eventually at Fort Crawford in Prairie du Chien. This would become an important tour for Doty, as many of his future townsites would be located along this route. Doty's intimate knowledge of the terrain, combined with his many years of lobbying, eventually came to fruition in 1832 when Congress authorized the Secretary of War (Doty's old friend Cass, former Governor of the Michigan Territory) to construct a roadway connecting Wisconsin's three forts: Fort Howard in Green Bay, Fort Winnebago in Portage, and Fort Crawford in Prairie du Chien. While Doty certainly deserves some of the credit for the passage of the roadway, Congress approved the measure during the Black Hawk War, a time when military control of Indian actions seemed imperative. Secretary of War Cass selected Doty to work with Army Lieutenant Alexander J. Center to select the route of the proposed road, which for the most part maintained the path taken by Doty on his 1829 trip. Their selection was eventually approved, and construction was undertaken by army troops at each of the three forts.
Figure 4-4. Overland travel in the Wisconsin Territory. State Historical Society of Wisconsin.
The roadway was, in fact, a very long one and the construction was crude.\textsuperscript{5} Lanes were cleared through forestland. Logs, covered with mounds of earth provided dry crossings over lowlands. Simple timber bridges were built over streams and small rivers. Piles of stones marked the route across long stretches of open prairie. But as simple as it was, the road became a thoroughfare of commerce. Squatters took up claims along the route in order to take advantage of the travelers that were sure to follow. The road served to open vast sections of the territory to settlers, sections that had previously been inaccessible. The road also made these interior properties desirable, since the products of the land could now be taken to market year round. In addition, the road served to calm the fears of settlers with regard to hostile Indian actions, feeling that they were connected to one of the nearby forts, under the protection of its troops.\textsuperscript{6} In actual military terms the road proved to have little value, since by the time it was completed the frontier had moved west of the Mississippi, leaving the forts in essentially "secure" territory. But Doty's long time dream of the road had come true and as we shall see he attempted to make the most of his accomplishment.\textsuperscript{7}