Figure 5-1. The Town of Astor, located on a map of Wisconsin depicting the Fox, Mississippi, and Wisconsin Waterways.
CHAPTER 5:
THE PLAN OF ASTOR

For many decades preceding the 1830's, Green Bay had been the site of the winter residence of a large number of fur traders. Many of these traders sat on early land claims, upon which they had built primitive dwellings in which they spent the frozen months. As settlement and commerce at Green Bay increased throughout the 20's and 30's, the value of the property on which they sat had steadily increased. Unfortunately for these traders the business in which they dealt, furs, had not.\textsuperscript{1} A century of relentless hunting and trapping had seriously hurt fur bearing animal populations, this combined with an increase in competition had sent many in the fur business into heavy indebtedness. 1834 marked the end of an era for fur trade at Green Bay, when the owner of the American Fur Company, John Jacob Astor, made the decision to dissolve what had once been a vast and powerful monopoly. The American Fur Company had for several years been providing Green Bay traders with goods and provisions in excess of the value of the furs they received, taking in exchange the mortgages to the traders extensive land holdings in Green Bay. In the summer of 1834 the company foreclosed on numerous holdings, and John Jacob Astor at once became the single largest property owner in Green Bay with valuable lands almost immediately across the river from Fort Howard. Adjacent to Astor's new land was the successful village of Navarino and it offered an inspiring precedent of what should be done with the property: lay out a townsite.\textsuperscript{2}
Figure 5-2. Map of Green Bay and the Fox River, showing the long lots seized in foreclosure by Astor in 1834. Neville Public Museum of Brown County.
The village of Navarino had been platted as a townsite in
1829 by Daniel Whitney, a highly respected citizen and
trader of the Green Bay area. Whitney had managed to
take what had seemed little more than a swamp and turn it
into the most successful townsite in the region. The town
was, after all, directly across the river from Fort Howard
and occupied the junction of the Fox and Manitou (or East)
rivers as well. A warehouse, wharf and hotel had all been
built under Whitney's promotional efforts and as the land
was cleared of brush it evidently dried up. Lots were selling
well. As Navarino grew with a new Post office, federal land
office and a newspaper, it had come to replace the earlier
Munnomunne and Munnomone townsites (located further
away from the fort) that had been developed by Doty and
Lawe. Astor was further convinced of the development
potential of his adjacent land when Daniel Whitney made
an offer of ten thousand dollars for the property, presumably
to extend his townsite onto Astor's higher and drier land.
Whitney (and just about everyone else it seems) had con-
fidence that the Green Bay area was destined for great
things. In 1832 the federal government had provided
monies for the military road connecting Green Bay with the
Mississippi and that road had been laid out and was under
construction. The road, they felt, would make Green Bay
an important stop for travelers and settlers as the vast in-
terior of the territory was opened up. With these things in
mind, the millionaire New Yorker John Jacob Astor made
the decision to develop a townsite on his newly acquired
property. What was needed was a local resident of con-
siderable knowledge and savvy that could lay out the lots,
promote their sale, and in general deal with the vast
problems likely to be encountered in the development of a
successful townsite.
Figure 5.3. Partial plan of New York City: ca. 1840. Note especially Washington Square.
James Duane Doty, having lost his Judgeship (and payroll) in 1832, had spent the two following years engaged largely in the private practice of law. In his years as circuit judge Doty had developed a list of supporters (and enemies) across the territory and his political skill and wide knowledge of the region made him an obvious choice as the promoter for the new town of Astor. Doty was well aware of Astor's new land acquisitions, as he had been hired by the American Fur Company as lawyer in order to serve the foreclosure notices in 1834. Given Doty's close connection in this way, he may certainly have been an instigator in the concept of platting a townsite on the property, as he had done in the project with Lawe. Doty traveled east to New York in early 1835 and struck a deal with Astor which empowered him to plat the new town, promote development there and sell the lots to investors and settlers. For these services, Doty received a one quarter share in the entire property as well as an agreement that he would retain one quarter of all monies derived from the sale of lots. During his negotiations with Astor, Doty certainly had ample opportunity to see New York as it existed in 1835. Since he laid out the plan of Astor shortly thereafter it seems highly likely that he was in some way influenced by what he saw. In 1811, the well known commissioner's plan for New York had laid out a vast and extensive gridiron, interrupted by a few reserves for squares and other public amenities. While in New York, Doty would have had opportunity to see and walk through several large public squares, several of which had been modeled after the pattern of the Bloomsbury residential squares in London. The New York grid iron interspersed with the Hudson Square type public open space seems to have had a direct influence on him, as he utilized both forms in the layout of Astor shortly thereafter.
Figure 5-4. Map of the Town of Astor: 1835. Courtesy of the Neville Museum of Brown County, Wisconsin.
Upon his return to Green Bay, Doty developed a design for the new town of Astor and mailed a drawing to New York for the review and approval of his client. Astor, being pleased with the scheme, gave Doty approval to move ahead with the work. Doty then hired a surveyor to mark important boundaries such that lots could be located. A plan of Astor was sent to a Broadway lithographic shop in New York where a stone was etched with a plan of the town. Doty's design for the plan of Astor takes as its starting point the preexisting village of Navarino to the north. All of Navarino's north-south streets are continued into Astor, knitting the two competing cities together as one. While this may seem to be a direct and obvious design concept, in other examples of competing adjacent towns proprietors would sometimes intentionally ignore the others' plats and would disassociated street grids from one town to the other. An example of this system exists in Milwaukee, the somewhat chaotic results of which Doty had seen during his trip to New York in 1835. Unlike the village of Navarino where haste and the desire to maximize saleable property had produced a plan of little interest or public amenity, the gridded streets are interrupted by a series of spaces devoted to the public good. Doty had advised his client that it was customary for western proprietors to contribute toward works of a public nature and the squares in the plan of Astor stand as a tribute to his convictions.
Figure 5-5. Detail of the plan of Astor: 1835. Neville Museum of Brown County.
Three public squares enliven the grid, all linked together by Madison Street onto which Doty hoped to route the military road from Prairie du Chien. This scheme makes movement down Madison Street the richest experience of the plan with all three open spaces strung along its length, alternating from side to side. The squares are all tied to the Fox River both by means of their close proximity to the waterfront and by means of streets which run on the central axis of each square to dead end in the water. Doty has also altered the design of the blocks surrounding these squares allowing twenty to twenty-four lots to take advantage of this valuable frontage. The three squares serve to make that part of the city nearest the water well supplied with public amenity, whereas the inland areas are poorly handled, lacking in adequate public open space. Doty contemplated cutting several canals through this neighborhood, although no drawings of this seem to have survived. Only two notable features enliven this large area: a public burial ground (labeled a square on the earliest versions) and a site for a school of manual labor. The cemetery, curiously located within the city plat, is treated like a missing city block. Cemeteries were soon to become "recreational" open spaces in many cities and Doty may have intended it as a kind of a square. The school ground, which is drawn as if surrounded by a walled enclosure, also resides as a block. The treatment of these two elements as ordinary city blocks allow the squares to dominate the plan by being the only elements to interrupt the gridiron. With the exception of the cemetery and the school grounds, Doty's plan is mute with regard to the functions which were to eventually inhabit the grid. No prominent sites were set aside for city hall, courthouse, churches or other public monuments. Neither does the plan attempt to differentiate between residential, civic, commercial or manufacturing districts. One can infer certain allocations from the plan, such as: inland residential blocks, civic buildings about the squares, commercial along the military road access, etc. The Astor plan is essentially mute with regard to specific function and the concerns of the design remain relatively simple: streets, blocks, squares, and the relationship of these to each other and to external conditions.
Figure 5-6. Detail of a plan of Astor from the archives of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

Figure 5-7. Reconstruction of the plan of Astor with the diagonal avenue.
On a plan in the collection of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, a diagonal avenue has been appended to the largest of the three public squares. Slashing through the city blocks, the idiosyncratic diagonal is labeled "Road to Chicago". In addition to his efforts in the layout of the military road to the Mississippi, Doty had been much involved in a proposal to construct a road to Chicago. His previously mentioned visit to Milwaukee had probably been part of a survey intended to determine the route of the proposed Fort Howard-Fort Dearbourn road. Intended then as a shortcut to connect the largest square of Astor with a highway to Chicago, the diagonal would have lent this square unique character and importance. This square or piazza would have been the meeting place of the two great highways of the territory, with all of the activity and commerce such an intersection would bring. This square has also been drawn differently than the other two open spaces, as it has received no lines defining a central "green," suggesting it was to be paved or graveled in entirety. The diagonal avenue attached to this primary piazza or square recalls Doty's familiarity with Woodward's radial planning at Detroit. While this issue has emerged here in a fragmentary way, the idea of the diagonal as expressed in Detroit and Washington shall emerge as a major force in Doty's work in a future chapter.
Figure 5-8. Elevation of the Astor House: ca. 1840-1850. State Historical Society of Wisconsin.
Even as the surveyor worked to set the stakes of the lots, Doty laid plans designed to encourage the development of the new town. He gave free lots to both Methodist and Presbyterian churches, in hopes that their flocks would follow. Churches were indeed built in 1836 and 1838, with Doty convincing Astor to donate a bell to the Presbyterians. Doty also attempted to have both the county seat, and the post office transferred to the new town. Early among his proposals was a scheme to build an impressive hotel in Astor, in order to encourage trade and make the city a desirable stopping off point for settlers. Modeled in some ways after a building that Doty had seen in New York, a fine hotel called the Astor House was built to Doty’s specifications. Located on the corner of Adams and Mason Streets the hotel was later lost to fire. A sketch of the Astor House survives, as remembered by an early resident. The front elevation of the Astor House represented the most luxurious and famous hotel of the territory in its day. Built of frame construction and painted white, the vaguely classical three story structure featured a hipped roof, a cupola and numerous dormers. Located only a few feet from the banks of the Fox and immediate to a wharf, the hotel must have been a powerful and welcoming sight when seen from incoming boats. Doty was also the developer and possibly designer of another public building: the Bank of Wisconsin. Located on Crooks Street, this address was arguably not the best for a bank location. These various attempts at increasing the value of lots in Astor were successful. Having initially refused an offer for the entire parcel of $10,000 in 1834, Astor refused an offer of $40,000 in 1835 and sold a one-sixteenth share in Astor for the very large sum of $37,500 in 1836. At the rate of this last purchase, the remaining parcels in Astor would have been worth over $600,000; all accomplished in only two years.
Figure 5.9. Plan of Green Bay: 1856. Milwaukee County Historical Society.
A plan drawn in the year 1856 (reproduced at left) shows that the competing towns of Astor and Navarino had been combined by that date into the City of Green Bay. The 1856 plan shows that some alterations to the original design have been made. While the three squares have all survived, the diagonal avenue has not. The road leading to Chicago now enters the city on the street passing through the centermost of the three squares, although this bridge is not shown on the plan. The school grounds, while still labeled as such, has been platted as lots. The "Burying Ground" remains, drawn in the same form as the squares. Few changes are seen in the remainder of the plan, although a small triangular block located at the intersection of Washington and Adams, has been transformed into "Astor Place." Perhaps the awkward shape and the small size of the original lots on this block made the properties unusable. Doty's design in the form seen at left, survived substantially intact until recently with lot subdivisions being the most frequent alterations. Unfortunately, the centermost square was destroyed during the 1960's for construction of a freeway ramp. This has diminished the once beautiful experience of moving down Madison Street, ruining an important feature of the city. The two remaining squares, however, are finely planted and well maintained. The largest of the original three squares has attracted several churches about its perimeter, the steeples of which mark the space from around the city. As Doty might have intended, the square is used for concerts on summer evenings, the church facades and towers seen through a canopy of trees.