Figure 6.1. The Town of Fond du Lac, located on a map of Wisconsin depicting the Fox, Mississippi, and Wisconsin waterways.
CHAPTER 6:
THE PLAN OF FOND DU LAC

In the fall of 1832, James Duane Doty stood on the banks of the Fond du Lac River and attempted to determine the best location for a bridge which would serve as an important link in the first highway to be built in the territory. Doty had recently received a contract from the federal government to determine the route of a military highway, the intent of which was to connect the three fortresses of the territory, and Doty had lost no time in beginning the survey. Doty had long known that the construction of such a highway would have a profound effect on development and settlement, and that land adjacent to the completed road (especially land with access to navigable water) would quickly become among the most valuable in the territory as sites for the development of towns. Although the land was low and sometimes wet, the land at the southern extremity of Lake Winnebago, near the mouth of the Fond du Lac River was such a site. Another possible motivation for Doty's interest in this property is summarized in an 1880 history of Fond du Lac County:

"...One reason which induced Doty to select this site as a city, was the well established fact that nearly all the largest cities of the West are built upon the ruins of important Indian villages, and such were known to have existed here at no very distant day..."

Doty had strong respect for Indian cultures and was in possession of substantial knowledge concerning local traditions. It is interesting to speculate that considerations such as previous Indian habitation played a significant role in his selection of townsites, as all of his developments up to this time had been located on or near previous Indian settlements.
Figure 6-2. Plat of Fond du Lac, Wisconsin: ca. 1835. State Historical Society of Wisconsin.
Doty must have kept the place in his mind, for when the lands were first opened for sale in late 1835, Doty and another partner stepped into the federal land office at Green Bay. There they purchased about thirty-seven hundred acres at the intersection of lake, river and military road. Soon after the purchase of the property Doty took on numerous partners, including the surveyor Albert Ellis and formed the Fond du Lac Company with Doty as the largest shareholder and president. In the fall of 1835 a plan of a village was drawn, probably the drawing reproduced as figure 6-2. Doty's plan for Fond du Lac is highly unique, taking its power from the repetitive use of a cross-shaped public open space. The plat begins as a uniform gridiron which has been imposed upon the serpentine shapes contained by Lake Winnebago and the Fond du Lac River. Doty then makes this grid unique by inserting seventeen cruciform shaped open spaces into the heart of each numbered ward, which can be read as "neighborhoods". The order and geometry of this pattern essentially ignores the natural shapes of the land. This creates several extremely awkward intersections, such as in blocks nineteen and twenty one. Major streets of sixty feet in width surround each numbered ward, while narrowed minor streets subdivide the ward into four quadrants, centering on a cruciform open space. While it can be assumed that the minor streets run straight through the cruciform open spaces, this fact is left unclear in the drawing. Also left tantalizingly unclear is the specific nature of the numerous cruciform open spaces shown on the plan. What was Doty's intention and what was the genesis of the idea?
Figure 6-3. Partial plan of Woodward's scheme for Detroit: 1807. Note especially the "...internal space of ground, in the middle of every section..."
Doty's acquaintance with Judge Augustus Woodward and his familiarity with the plan of Detroit offers a possible clue as to the genesis of the Fond du Lac plan. After leaving Detroit in 1823 he had been in the city on numerous occasions, as recently as the spring of 1835, just before designing Fond du Lac. The plan of Detroit, as designed by Judge Woodward in 1807, featured a similar concept of a ward surrounded by major streets or avenues, which contained a central open space of unique shape. A partial plan of Detroit (as Doty would have known it) is reproduced as figure 6-3, showing one such open space. An 1807 description of this open space reads:

"...the internal space of ground, in the middle of every section, shall be reserved for public wells and pumps, for markets... for houses for the meeting of religious, moral, literary, or political societies...and in the same manner shall be paved, planted with trees, or otherwise improved or ornamented."

Certainly Doty must have strolled through these tree planted spaces which sometimes contained small public buildings. It is easy to imagine that Doty drew upon his direct experiences for inspiration and developed a plan similar in concept to Woodward's, although with a different geometry.
Figure 6-4. Reconstruction of a "chequer board plan" according to Jefferson. The plan utilizes a 1790 lot subdivision also by Jefferson.
The overall plan of Fond du Lac also recalls an idea promoted by Thomas Jefferson: the concept of the "chequer board plan." In an 1805 correspondence, Jefferson states:

"Such a constitution of atmosphere being requisite to originate this disease as is generated only in low, close, and ill-cleansed parts of a town, I have supposed it practicable to prevent its generation by building our cities on a more open plan. Let the black squares only be building squares, and the white ones be left open, in turf and trees... The atmosphere of such a town would be like that of the country..."

It should be remembered that Doty's site for Fond du Lac was a low and sometimes wet location. It is certainly possible that Woodward had described Jefferson's idea to Doty during the time the two were together in Detroit. Fond du Lac may by Doty's version of Jefferson's "chequer board" of open spaces, utilized here in particular due to the lowland location. Jefferson himself was involved in several attempts to build this "chequer board," at which he was unsuccessful. Development pressures always worked to have the greens re-platted into lots and sold, a fate which foreshadowed Doty's plan.
Figure 6-5. Perspective view of the Fond du Lac House.
In the winter of 1835-36, Doty traveled to New York with the plan for purposes of having it engraved and reproduced. While in New York Doty altered the design of the town slightly by adding an eastern tier of city blocks, thereby creating a new major north-south street, a street which is today Main Street. The lithographic prints which Doty had made in New York were then extensively circulated, the drawing giving the appearance of a vast and successful city. At the time of its printing, however, there was not a single structure located within the town plat. Such promotion of sales may seem unscrupulous, but in fact no false claims are made with the plan. In comparison, nonexistent "paper towns" were sometimes drawn as already having received railroads, universities, courthouses and the like, in order to promote lot sales. Doty made no such false claims, but moved instead to direct the first constructions within the town himself. As he had done in Astor, Doty realized that a hotel or inn was a first requirement for lot sales. In the spring of 1836 the Fond du Lac Company erected a structure, an early view of which survives and is reproduced on the opposite page. The object of this construction was to provide a place of lodging and entertainment for prospective buyers. Often settlers lived for extended periods in the building, until their own homes were finished. The structure also served as the social center for the pioneer community and became something of a landmark as well. While simple and rustic when compared to the hotel that Doty had built in Astor, the "Fond du Lac House" had one unique feature: a large covered open space which passed through the main building. Such a covered hall outside the only tavern and restaurant in the region must have been a lively public place, especially during summer heat or rain. Built by Indians under the directions of the Fond du Lac Company, the enclosed outdoor hall seems likely to have been an idea of Doty's, given his concern for providing outdoor public spaces in the overall Fond du Lac plan.
Doty developed other schemes to aid in the development of the new city, some of them of grand scope. Doty had heard a tale of how Indian traders had paddled canoes loaded with goods, up the Fox River, across Lake Winnebago, up the Fond du Lac River, and then portage across land about two miles to reach the Rock River. Doty reasoned that if a canal were constructed between the Fond du Lac and the west branch of the Rock River (known as Doty's River), then a continuous waterway between Green Bay and the Mississippi would be opened. Such a waterway would be of enormous value and if it were completed Fond du Lac would become one of the major shipping towns in the territory. Schemes that seem wild in their extent today, once had considerable value and interest in another transportation economy. Doty was a New Yorker and was familiar with the great financial benefits that the Erie Canal had brought to the cities of New York. Few land speculators had the forethought in 1836 to imagine that the era of canals was already passing, soon to be completely replaced by railroads. Doty's thought concerning the locations of townsites is largely a product of the era of River and canal improvements and it will be seen that virtually every Doty townsite was associated with plans for navigable waterway proposals.
Figure 6-6. Plat of the Town of Fond du Lac, Wisconsin: 1836. Fond du Lac County Register of deeds.
Doty attended to many schemes devised to increase the value of his holdings, one of which was having the military road bridge rebuilt such that it aligned with Brooke Street in his new city. Travelers from Green Bay to the Mississippi then had to pass through most of the town in order to travel the route of the road. Doty also developed more devious plans, some of which are striking in their interconnections. Health care was always a problem on the frontier and Doty knowing this sought to lure a doctor from nearby Sheboygan with the promise of free property. Doty evidently felt that a guarantee of good health would promote lot sales. Seeking to kill numerous birds with one stone, Doty wrote a contract with a Dr. Darling deeding unto him over eighty acres immediately to the south of the newly platted town. The contract required that Dr. Darling build both a residence and a saw mill on his property, as well as live on the land and "cultivate it as a farm". This last proviso is interesting, as it was evidently done with the intention of providing the new city of Fond du Lac with a kind of buffer, preventing adjacent land from being platted into a townsite, and sold in competition with Doty's development. Doty knew the potential of such a scheme well, as he was at the same time stealing lot sales from Daniel Whitney's Navarino in Green Bay, having platted the town of Astor immediately adjacent to Whitney's development. Doty's plans with Dr. Darling were for a while successful, as the doctor built a house, practice, saw mill and left the eighty acres undeveloped. The doctor was, however, an extremely shrewd character with plans for Fond du Lac of his own.12
Dr. Darling, who had taken up residence in Fond du Lac in 1838, quickly became the leading citizen of the village. Besides the prominence that came with being the only doctor for miles, Dr. Darling ran the saw mill, became post-master, and allowed village residents to hold church services in his home. As the village grew, Dr. Darling invested heavily in land to the south and east of Doty's village plat and purchased stock shares in the Fond du Lac Company as well. Darling also rented the log Fond du Lac House from Doty and upon doing so promptly closed and locked the establishment. Moving all of its operations some distance away onto his own property, Darling opened a new building which he also called the "Fond du Lac House". When these things were accomplished, Dr. Darling instituted court proceedings intended to dissolve the Fond du Lac Company and have its assets divided among the shareholders. While this suit tied up all land holdings of the company and stopped sales completely, Dr. Darling took to platting his recent purchases into lots and streets, which he sold or gave to those who would agree to construct buildings upon them. This situation served to create a rapidly growing new village, separated from Doty's now foundering town by the eighty acres which Doty had deeded to Darling in the first place. In 1845 the court of Chancery of Green Bay found in favor of Dr. Darling and Doty's Fond du Lac Company ceased to be. Dr. Darling quickly platted his eighty acres of farmland into lots and deeded to the county a very small lot intended for the construction of a courthouse. This courthouse lot, surrounded by Darling's property, was accepted by the county and a building was built upon it.
Figure 6-7. Plan of Fond du Lac, Wisconsin: 1878. American Geographic Society Collection.
The off-color maneuvers of Dr. Darling served to make his property the center of development in the new town. Doty's original plat was reduced to the status of outskirts. In all of these actions, Doty was soundly defeated, and for the City of Fond du Lac, this was an unfortunate thing. For Dr. Darlings various plats were done piecemeal, with little or no intention to the public good and welfare. Unlike the seventeen public open spaces set aside by Doty, Darling set aside no land whatsoever for public squares or greens. The result is that downtown Fond du Lac developed almost exclusively on Darlings property, in the form of a poorly laid out grid lacking in character and amenity. A plan of Fond du Lac as it appeared in an 1878 Wisconsin atlas tells the story. The cruciform open spaces of Doty's original plan can clearly be seen, and below it to the south is the chaotic layout of Dr. Darling. From the distribution of public buildings, shown as black figures on the plan, it can be seen that the "center" of town now occurs on Darling's plat, holding more than twice as many public institutions as Doty's original plan. Also of interest in this view is the fact that not all of Doty's original plat has survived: those wards nearest Lake Winnebago have disappeared. The land in this area being low and marshy, this area was deemed too wet for settlement by the early townspeople. In addition, one of the original wards, number fifteen in Doty's plan, has been re-platted into six rectangular blocks formed by Bannister, and north and south Sibley Streets. This was the first of numerous re-plattings that the original plan would receive.
Figure 6-8. Plans of Ward #10 in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin: (top) 1835, (center) 1874, (bottom) 1949.
Overshadowed by Dr. Darling's efforts, Doty's plan suffered further erosions throughout the nineteenth century. In particular, the cruciform public open spaces, so prominent in the early drawings, were all re-platted and eventually lost in the course of one hundred years. To understand these changes, a plan of a single 1835 ward or neighborhood is compared to an 1874 drawing of the same ward. The 1874 plan demonstrates that Doty's plat was executed with the streets running through the center of each cruciform open space, cutting the "green" into four small "L" shapes, each quite narrow in proportion. This division of land runs contrary to the manner in which squares had traditionally been planned, with streets running around the perimeter of a square containing and defining it as a common and public open space. The result of this was that the twelve central lots seemed to possess unusually large front yards. This left little or no impression of a public green or square shared in common and must certainly have discouraged any communal use of these spaces. There seems to have been little use or appreciation of these spaces, as no mention of them can be found in early detailed descriptions of the city. A later plan, taken from a 1949 city engineering map, shows that by this date Doty's cruciform greens had been abandoned, and re-platted by the city into private lots.
Why were all seventeen of Doty's public spaces at Fond du Lac lost, when the squares he designed at Astor, for example, have survived many generations? At Astor the squares were modeled after the traditional London residential square in which streets defined the perimeter of the green. At Fond du Lac the streets bisected the greens rather than surround them. This made them a part of the privately owned city block and discouraged use and perception of them as part of the public realm; to the extent that they were abandoned as public places, to be deeded over as private property. While it is highly unfortunate that none of the early work at Fond du Lac has survived, the same plan form was used in the plat of Marquette, Wisconsin in the year 1836. Marquette is a Fox River town developed by several shareholders of the Fond du Lac Company, Doty's involvement being somewhat limited. Marquette is especially interesting, in that several of the cruciform open spaces have survived until the present day, to give something of an impression of Doty's intentions at Fond du Lac.\textsuperscript{13}