Figure 8-1. Kentucky City, located on a map of Wisconsin depicting the Fox, Mississippi, and Wisconsin waterways.
CHAPTER 8:  
THE PLAN OF KENTUCKY CITY

When lands in the western extent of the territory were 
opened for sale in 1836, Doty purchased a large parcel of 
property on the east bank of the Wisconsin River. Located 
several miles to the south of Portage, the site was selected be-
cause it included the outlet of the potentially navigable Doty 
Creek (as it came to be referred to). While Doty is listed in 
an 1880 History of Columbia County as the purchaser of the 
property, it seems that he was acting as an agent for several 
eastern speculative investors.¹ Doty invested funds from a 
joint account set up by John Jacob Astor, for example, the fur 
magnate for whom Doty had designed and developed the 
town of Astor on Green Bay.² At Astor, Doty had received 
one quarter of the monies generated by land sales in ex-
change for his services. It seems likely that a similar deal was 
struck at Kentucky City. For his fee, Doty would have 
selected the location based on his 1832 military road survey of 
the region, arranged for the purchase of the land, designed 
the town, hired a surveyor to locate important lot corners and 
attempted to promote the sale of property in the paper village 
by whatever means possible. For Doty, the promotion of 
townsites included the development of transportation links 
which would connect the new city to the commerce of the out-
side world. Doty knew of the spectacular success stories told 
by towns linked to the Erie canal in New York State. These 
tales had made a powerful impact upon his thinking, for at the 
Kentucky City townsite, Doty pursued several canal projects, 
all planned to make the fledgling town a shipping center at-
ttractive to investors and settlers.
Figure 8-2. Plan of Kentucky City, Wisconsin: ca. 1836. State Historical Society of Wisconsin.
Shortly after his July, 1836 purchase of the Kentucky City site, Doty was promoting the passage of a canal bill in the territorial legislature. Working to connect two of his town sites, he had developed a proposal to construct a canal from Fond du Lac, to the nearest navigable spot on the Rock River, and from there to Kentucky City. The proposal died on the floor, but Doty was to return later with yet another canal project: the "Marquette and Kentucky City Canal Company". Devised to bypass Portage, this canal would have provided a direct connection between the Fox and Wisconsin Rivers. This too was a failure and no canal projects were ever built in conjunction with Kentucky City. But Kentucky City was platted and opened for sale and a drawing, probably from 1836, survives. Reproduced as figure 8-2, the plan shows a vast and ambitious city suitable for thousands of inhabitants. The plan takes the shape of a uniform gridiron of rectangular city blocks, the monotony of which is only partially enlivened by two reserves for public open space: a square and a landing. The square is large, containing eighteen acres in area. The street at the western boundary of the square connects directly to the Wisconsin River where Doty has reserved property for use as a public landing. A proposed dam and mill race are shown along Doty creek, with a reserve for mills also being depicted. In addition to these features, the extreme awkwardness with which the street grid intersects with the shoreline (in the western part of the city) is evident.
Figure 8.3. Plan of Dekorra (Kentucky City), Wisconsin: 1861. State Historical Society.
Kentucky City as a development was a failure. The land sales of 1836 led to a market scare and financial depression of 1837, which served to halt development in all but the most successful cities. Doty's failure to pass the 1836 canal bill and the lack of amenity relative to other plans developed by Doty, may have also served to discourage investors. A landing and a hotel were built, but little additional development occurred there. In 1842, the city plat was reduced in size and altered in design. The name of the city was changed to Dekorra at this time, and the changes that were made to the plan are highly interesting. While the author of these changes is unknown, Doty may have been involved in this work. Reproduced as it appeared in an 1861 Columbia County Atlas, the greatly reduced City of Dekorra is shown on the opposite page. Much altered in appearance, Dekorra nevertheless retains the skeleton of Kentucky City. The vast public square has been reduced to one-sixth of its former size, the remaining parts subdivided as lots. The reservation for the public landing remains, and the street connecting it to the square has become "main street". The most significant change is the "correction" of the awkward collision of gridiron and shore, accomplished by setting the western grid of the city askew, to an angle parallel to the Wisconsin River shoreline. This creates a city of two parts, joined about main street, now clearly the most important street in the plan. The revised composition more easily accommodates the curve in the river, and because of its smaller overall size, it now seems to possess adequate public open space.