Figure 9-1. Wisconsinapolis, located on a map of Wisconsin depicting the Mississippi, Wisconsin, and Fox Waterways.
CHAPTER 9:
THE PLAN OF WISCONSINAPOLIS

Around the year 1870, the surveyor and long time Green Bay resident John Suydam, prepared a statement for the state historical society which was published in the Wisconsin Historical Collections. Suydam's recollections deal specifically with a tour he undertook with James Duane Doty in 1836, during which they laid out several cities together. A quote directly from Suydam reads:

"On the second day of November of the year in which the session of the Legislature was held at Belmont, Gov. Doty and myself started from Green Bay on horseback... On our way we stopped at various places...at Duck Creek, on the east bank of the Wisconsin River, about eight or ten miles below Portage City, where we laid out the town of Wisconsinapolis."¹

Period maps of the territory reveal that Wisconsinapolis was not located at the mouth of Duck Creek as Suydam suggests, but was in fact situated nearby on the north shore of Swan Lake, a widening in the Fox River. While the aged Suydam has the location slightly wrong, his statement that Doty laid out Wisconsinapolis is a direct and first person account.² There is additional evidence to connect Wisconsinapolis to Doty, in particular a canal project, pursued by Doty and passed at the 1838 session of the territorial legislature. The act of the legislature incorporated the "Marquette and Swan Lake Canal Company", featuring Doty as the leading figure in the corporation.³ Besides connecting Marquette and Wisconsinapolis on Swan Lake, the corporation would have built a canal directly to the Wisconsin River. The effect of these canals would have been to bypass Portage and transform the paper cities of Marquette and Wisconsinapolis into busy trading ports. Doty knew the region around Swan Lake well, as he had carefully mapped it during the planning of the military road in 1832.
Figure 9-2. Plan of Wisconsinapolis, Wisconsin: ca. 1836. Re-drawn from a very poor print in the collection of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.
A plan of Wisconsinapolis, probably drawn in late 1836, was filed in Green Bay on January 3, 1837. The plan lists Dr. Lyman Foot and C. McDougall as the proprietors. Doty was an acquaintance of Foot, as they lived nearby each other in Navarino and Astor. Foot was doubtless aware of Doty's skill as the agent of John Jacob Astor in the development of Astor, and Foot may have retained Doty in a similar capacity. The design of Wisconsinapolis is a unique and powerful plan offering clues that Doty was in fact the author. Starting as a gridiron of streets and blocks, the plan features several unique public open spaces linked together in a sequence. A "Public Square" was laid out roughly in the center of the town with a long dimension of 912 feet. The square of Madison, which according to Suydam was laid out by Doty only days later, features a central square of 914 feet to a side. A street aligned with the central axis of the main square, connects directly to the banks of the Fox River. On the waterfront a major public plaza has been reserved, doubtless for use as a landing and for subsequent commercial activities. This plaza is drawn differently than the two squares of the plan, as it receives no lines defining a green. The implication is that of a large space entirely surfaced as a street, a feature that would make sense for a busy port location. City blocks enclose three sides of the plaza with the fourth side being open to the south to a small natural harbor. This harbor is further enclosed by city blocks that occupy two peninsulas, altogether forming a pleasing and picturesque impression that the city "embraces" the water at this point. Near the northern extent of the town is another square, this one long and linear in an east-west direction. This square has the effect of terminating the axis received from the harbor and central square and turning this axis towards two small lakes. These lakes are "captured" by the city and surrounded by streets, lending an impression of a public place filled with water. Altogether, Wisconsinapolis is a fascinating plan, an excellent example of how a simple and practical gridiron can be made unique and particular when care and skill are devoted to the design of public places.
The canals that could have transformed Wisconsinpolis into a boom town were never built. While the settlement was located on a widening of the Fox River, commercial traffic from the great lakes usually transferred to the Wisconsin River at Portage, never passing the site of the city. Doty, who traveled to the session of the Territorial Legislature within days of platting Wisconsinpolis, seems to have forwarded the name of the paper city as a candidate for the new territorial capital. As records of the 1836 session record, Wisconsinpolis narrowly escaped being one of the most significant cities in the territory by a vote of six ayes to seven noes. Doty’s plan of Madison was accepted as the capital site at that same convention, and after that date Doty seems to have focused on the development of the new capital, leaving other cities to lay fallow. Although some lots were later sold, no structures ever seem to have been erected there. One of the few written accounts of Wisconsinpolis reads:

"Henry Merrill relates that upon one occasion a gentleman came into his store at the fort, and inquired at what hour steamboats left for Wisconsinpolis. He was told that at the time boats were very irregular, but he could direct him to the place. The man then inquired which was the best hotel. Mr. Merrill declined to answer that question, as he did not wish to injure his popularity as a business man by showing partiality in the case. A few hours afterward, when he returned from the "city," where no building larger than an Indian Wigwam had ever been erected, and where twenty-five white men had probably never set foot, he drove rapidly by, neither looking to the right or left, his curiosity having been abundantly satisfied."