

John S. Monroe Biography

First settler left a rich heritage.

Chance and circumstance led John S. Monroe to a little clearing in the woods that later became a thriving community of Wausaukee. Born in the town of Wilma, N.Y., November 5, 1822, John Smith Monroe was one of a family of six children. He attended the public school until age 16 and remained in the community until age 22, at which time he struck out for Sackett's Harbor, N.Y., and entered the ship builders trade.

While working in the shipyards of Hunting & Riggs, Monroe was promoted to the position of master mechanic, a distinction rarely attained by one so young. The drive and ambition remained a part of his character throughout his life and helped him achieve success in a number of occupational fields.

In the fall of 1847, Monroe claimed Jean Belton, daughter of a prosperous farmer, as his wife. The newlyweds move to Southport. (now Kenosha) where Monroe was to assist in building a ship. The vessel was named the Lewis C. Erwin and was promptly put to work in the lumber trade by its owner, William Lay, a lumber dealer and entrepreneur.

Voyage to Menominee.

Monroe also built a sailboat which he placed on the deck of the Lewis C. Erwin on its first voyage north. When the ship reached Menominee, Monroe and a companion launched the sailboat and cruised down the shore to Green Bay. The two men stopped at the mouths of the principal streams that emptied into Green Bay - the Peshtigo, Pensaukee, Suamico and Oconto Rivers.

It was the spring of 1848, and the north country was dotted with only a handful of Pioneer outposts. Menominee was one of those unpretentious settlements, centering around a trading post, owned by John Jacobs. Other entrepreneurs included Dr. Hall, who owned a Watermill in Everett, Eveland and Quimby, who had set up a fishing business. With only a handful of white settlers, Indians made up the majority of the population.

Monroe sensed that this could be the land of opportunity. In search of materials for masts, he sailed up the Pensaukee and secured some fine timber. More than that, he glimpsed the wild interior of Northeast Wisconsin, and the seed was planted that later led to his settling in the same area.

The following winter, Monroe and his wife left Southport and came as far as Fond du Lac by stage. Then he procured his own rig and continued to Green Bay where he carved in putting niche for himself in the shipbuilding trade. In 1862 he ventured to Lake superior to build a dredge for a private concern.

As he built his financial foundation, he purchased a piece of land 3 1/2 miles east of DePere. He was impressed by the parcel because of the large number of oak trees growing on it, for that was the best sort of timber for building ships. He cleared and worked the land, but he was too restless to tie himself to one place. He still worked in the shipyards and built the first scow for curing lumber to shipping vessels and bringing supplies back to Oconto for Colonel Jones of Oconto, and for Norton & Co.

Reflections on early byways.

Monroe told many stories of life in the early days. To give an example of what things were like, he often told of making a trip to Pensaukee, From Green Bay to Duck Creek, there was a fairly good wagon road. At Duck Creek, he crossed over on a boom and proceeded to the Big Suamico over a wagon trail that was so narrow in some places, a wagon could barely squeeze through. From Big Suamico to Little Suamico, there was nothing but an Indian blaze, and from Little Suamico to Pensaukee he traveled through the woods with nothing to guide him but his common sense.

At Pensaukee judge Arndt had a watermill. Col. Jones owned one at Oconto and Peshtigo Co. owned another

Peshtigo. There were no steam mills in the area. Lumber was taken down in rafts to the bay and delivered at \$4.50 a thousand, mill run.

Monroe blazed a trail from Green Bay to Stiles, and Eldridge and Ladue put on men to clear a primitive thoroughfare. In 1878, Monroe sold his farm and opened a sawmill at DePere, which he operated for about five years. But he still dreamed of the wild and promising country farther north, and he was not a man to back down from a challenge.

In the spring of 1883, when the Milwaukee & Northern railroad had been built as far north as Coleman, and the survey and great deal of grading had been done north of there, Monroe came north to find a location for his own mill. He brought along a crew of men and a freshly signed contract with the company to furnish timber for bridges and culverts. He came to the end of the line on the train and began operations between there and Pike (now Amberg). Monroe was pleased with the location of Wausaukee for a mill, and he obtained 160 acres of land, built a log house on it, and moved his family north in the fall.

First house in Wausaukee.

The log house he built for his family was the first house in Wausaukee. In the fall of 1883, a section house was built in Wausaukee when the railroad stretched as far north as Cedarville. The men who built the structure boarded with the Monroe family during construction. The third structure in Wausaukee was built for Joseph Aino. From this tiny community of only three buildings, Monroe shipped timber, cedar posts, pilings and railroad ties.

The nearest sign of civilization for the intrepid band of settlers at Wausaukee was the whole Kittson trading post for the Northwestern Fur Co. on the Menominee River, three and a half miles away. The next nearest settlement was the Pike farm, about eight miles away.

January 12, 1885, Monroe was appointed postmaster and was the first man to handle mail at Wausaukee. The establishment of a post office was an exciting step for the fledging community, for it seemed to validate its existence. It meant that Wausaukee was a solid and established community that deserved a place on the map.

An article appearing in the February 1, 1896 edition of the independent gave this description of Monroe: "Mr. Monroe is a kind old gentleman, accommodating to a fault, and many have received favors at his hands. In partnership with C.R. Merrill, of Green Bay, he owns quite a tract of excellent farming land in this vicinity, and some desirable lots in the village.

He keeps boarders at his place, has a blacksmith shop, and three teams of horses that are kept at work right along. With a portable engine and circular saw he has a gang of men cutting up stove wood for his winter. The lumber companies have stopped off at his place ever since they began hauling supplies this way, and transients often make up their headquarters while in town.

Loghouse becomes haven for travelers.

As the lumber boom brought more and more men to the Northwoods, the log structure built by Monroe grew into an inn. It was the only eating place north of Green Bay, located at the site now used for Smith's market. Meals were 25 cents and always featured homemade pie. Room and board came to \$26 a month.

The kitchen was known for its fine and well, according to a letter written by Monroe's granddaughter, Grace Paddock, to Helen Laun: "Nearly all who stopped at the house like the good water. This well never ran dry, and there were times when 30 to 40 horses were watered from it when the camp supply wagons stopped in Wausaukee overnight on her way to the various logging camps. It is a pity the well is lost.

The Monroes had five children, Sarah, who died in infancy; John Wallace; Helen Elizabeth, often known as Libby; Eliza May; and Harry. Libby ran the Monroe establishment until about 1935, but declined selling it to interested parties for fear liquor would be served on the premises. Ray Gustavson purchased the property in 1942 to make way for his hardware and implement business.

Monroe died March 25, 1900, at the age of 77. The cause of death was listed as "over exertion and walking, his heart being affected". In his later years, Wausaukee's founding father suffered from poor eyesight, though he was considered uncommonly spry for a man of his age.

A lengthy account of his funeral was given in the March 31 issue of the Independent, including this: The funeral was held from the residence Wednesday afternoon on the direction of undertaker W. L. Bice. Reverend W. J. Lewis officiated. The pallbearers were: H.P. Bird, R.E. Rickaby, H. D. Somerville, Seth Ferdon, Sr., Charles. Bordeau and J. B. Loomis. Out of respect for the deceased, Bird and Wells Lumber Co. shut down their mill to give employees an opportunity to attend the obsequies. Without an exception, it was the largest attended funeral ever held here. Jane Belton Monroe followed her husband and death May 14th, 1901.