

## **The Establishment of the Koshkonong Settlement in Dane County, Wisconsin.**

Source: History of Norwegian Immigration to The United States From the Earliest Beginning down to the Year 1848 By GEORGE T. FLOM, Ph. D. (Columbia)

The genesis of the settlement of Koshkonong Prairie<sup>[121]</sup> in Dane County, Wisconsin, the most noted undoubtedly of all Norwegian settlements in America, dates from 1840. The recital of this event, however, will take us back to the preceding year; for the first visit of Norwegians to Dane County, is, I believe, correctly recorded as having taken place in 1839. Before discussing the first coming of Norse pioneers to Koshkonong I shall mention a few "first settlers" in Dane County, who preceded the Norwegians; to do this will help to give us a better idea of the state of wilderness which they found there, and which they in a few years transformed into a settled and thriving community.

The townships in Dane County in which the Norwegians settled most extensively are found in three groups, viz.: in the southeastern, in the northern and in the southwestern part of the county. The first of these comprises originally Albion, Christiana and Deerfield; from this region the settlement soon grew into Dunkirk and Pleasant Spring, and from the latter north into Cottage Grove.<sup>[122]</sup> On the east it extends into Sumner and Oakland townships in Jefferson County. This settlement came to be known as Koshkonong Prairie, though properly the name applies only to the two first-named towns and adjacent portions of Pleasant Spring and Deerfield. The second settlement includes the townships of Burke, eastern Westport, Vienna, Windsor, and northwestern and central Bristol. The western portion of this settlement is generally known by the name of the Norway (or Norwegian) Grove Settlement, from the post-office of that name in Vienna Township around which it lies. In its northern extremity the settlement extends into Columbia County, northeast into Spring Prairie and Bonnet Prairie and northwest past the village of Lodi. This whole region is in reality a northern extension of the Koshkonong Settlement.<sup>[123]</sup> It is also from four to eight years later in order of formation.<sup>[124]</sup> Our third group of townships comprises Primrose, Perry, Springdale, Blue Mound and that part of Verona Township which lies east of Blue Mound Creek.<sup>[125]</sup>

In the Town of Albion the Norwegians were the earliest settlers, for some of them came as early as the spring of 1841, as we shall see below. The History of Dane County, 1880,<sup>[126]</sup> says, page 838, that Freeborn Sweet, from New York, was the first settler in the town; and yet on page 1189 we are told that he was "one of the first settlers." As he did not arrive until August of that year he clearly was not the first. The next earliest American settler seems to have been Samuel T. Stewart of Massachusetts, who located on section fourteen in the fall of 1841.<sup>[127]</sup> The first white settler in the Town of Christiana was William M. Mayhew who came in 1837, and located

on section twenty-eight. The next arrivals were Norwegians (see below).

The first settler in Pleasant Spring seems to have been Abel Rasdall, who located his cabin on the eastern shore of Lake Kegonsa, about half a mile south of the inlet; the year of his arrival, however, cannot be given definitely and I am not able to say with certainty whether he preceded Knut H. Roe (see below) or not. In the Town of Deerfield the first settlement was made by Norwegians in 1840; as we shall show below; however, Philip Kearney had erected a house on section eighteen in 1839; he remained the only American there for several years.

The first settlers in the Town of Rutland were Joseph Dejean, John Prentice and Dan Pond, who located in its southern part in 1842. John Nelson Luraas may have been the first settler in Dunkirk; he came in 1843, and was followed soon after by John Wheeler,[128] Chauncey Isham, and Mitchel Campbell. In the towns of Cottage Grove, Burke, Windsor, and Bristol, Americans preceded Norwegians by several years, as also in Blue Mounds, where Ebenezer Brigham located as early as 1828, or some sixteen years before that part of the county actually became settled.

The Township of Springdale was settled first in 1844, when John Harlow entered it, he remaining the only white man there for a year. A few Americans came in 1845, then Americans and Norwegian immigrants in 1846. An American settlement was effected by Thomas Lindsay and David Robertson in the Town of Bristol (section seven) two years before Norwegians came there, which was in 1847. The earliest settler, however, seems to be William G. Simons who entered in 1838. The first white settler in Perry Township was John Brown of Indiana, who came into the town in 1846. A few other Americans (as B. K. Berry in 1847) preceded the Norwegians, whose coming dates from 1848. In the Town of Primrose, Robert Spears and family were the first comers (1844); a few other Americans had also arrived there before Christian Hendrickson located in the town in 1846. We shall now turn to the events that led to the establishment of the extensive Norwegian settlement on Koshkonong Prairie in the southeastern part of the county.

We have seen that most of the immigrants from Voss, Norway, who came in 1839, located either in Chicago or in La Salle County, Illinois. It has been observed also that not all of those who went to the Fox River region located there permanently. The land here was now mostly taken, besides our pioneers from Voss did not like the prairie; they were in search of a location where timber and water was near at hand. And so some of them decided to try their fortune in Wisconsin, where they had heard there was plenty of forest land with many lakes and rivers.

Our party from Voss had been in La Salle County only a few weeks, when three of them decided to go and investigate for themselves. These three were Nils Bolstad, Nils Gilderhus and Magne Bystölen. They engaged Odd J. Himle (who had emigrated from Voss in 1837), then living in Illinois, to accompany them as their guide and interpreter. Bystölen, being taken sick and thus prevented from going, gave instructions to the rest to select land for him if the region was

satisfactory to the rest. Bolstad, Gilderhus and Himle started on foot for Milwaukee, a distance of a hundred and fifty miles. Having arrived there in safety, they procured maps and whatever information they could with reference to the regions that were open to settlement in the interior of the state. Then they walked west about eighty miles inspecting the land on the way, and after two weeks reached the eastern part of Dane County.

The spot where they stopped was about two miles east of the site of the present village of Cambridge. Here a man by the name of Snell had shortly before established a tavern for trappers and frontiersmen; with him our party of homeseekers put up, and from him they received instructions as to the "government markings" of the sections and the stakes placed at the corner of sections and quarter sections, giving the number of each.

After a two days' rest they continued their tramp westward to Koshkonong<sup>[129]</sup> Prairie. Himle, Gilderhus and Bolstad inspected the whole prairie from one end to the other, walking about for two days. Then they returned to Cambridge, finally deciding on a parcel of land a little over two miles northwest of that place, lying on both sides of the boundary line between the towns of Christiana and Deerfield. Here Gilderhus and Bolstad selected forty acres each, and forty for Bystölen. This locality was chosen because of its abundance of hardwood timber, and besides there was plenty of hay on the marshes and fine fishing in Koshkonong Creek near by.<sup>[130]</sup>

Having thus made their choice of land, Gilderhus, Bolstad, and Himle returned to Illinois by way of Milwaukee, walking the whole distance; they remained in La Salle County through the winter. Their account of the land of promise which they had discovered, aroused much interest, and, as we shall see below, brought others in their train later. Early in the spring of 1840, Gilderhus and Bolstad, accompanied now by Magne Bystölen and also Andrew Finno, started for Koshkonong, driving, this time, in wagons drawn by oxen. They arrived there at the end of April and immediately took possession of the land selected. The land that had been chosen for Bystölen was inside the Christiana Township line, where Anders Finno also now located. Nils Gilderhus's land lay within Deerfield Township; he was the first Norwegian to locate there. He built a log cabin, which was the first house in the town. Nils Gilderhus and, I believe, Nils Bolstad, soon after walked to Milwaukee and filed their claims at the government land office, Nils Gilderhus being the first in the party to purchase land. The date of the purchase is May sixth, 1840; the land is the south half of the southwest quarter of section thirty-five. Nils Bolstad entered on forty acres of section two in the Town of Christiana, and Magne Bystölen's forty acres lay directly east of Bolstad's in the same section.<sup>[131]</sup>

Their first habitation was a hurriedly built log cabin; it was not plastered, and, as we can believe, proved inadequate as a protection against winter, which was already setting in. Here they experienced the intensest suffering from cold,<sup>[132]</sup> until, the condition becoming intolerable, they dug out a cellar against an embankment, where they lived during the remainder of the cold season. In this "dugout" Nils Gilderhus and Magne Bystölen continued to live another year, but

Nils Bolstad erected a log cabin in 1841, when he married Anna Vindeig, who was the first white woman in the locality. Gilderhus erected a cabin in the town of Deerfield near the Christiana line in 1842, but he sold out in 1843 to Gulleik Thompson Saue; for further facts about these men see below. Andrew Fenno and Odd Himle did not purchase land.[133]