

Early Scandinavian Settlement of Waukesha County – Gustav Unonius

Good Morning! My name is Jo Ann Friend Villavicencio. I'm delighted to be here to help honor and celebrate Gustav Unonius and the heritage of the early Swedish pioneers that are at the heart of what is now the Village of Chenequa.

In 1948 the Wisconsin Swedish Pioneer Centennial Commission decided to erect a small monument in Chenequa to commemorate the arrival of Gustav Unonius and his countrymen, and the founding of New Upsala. We are proud to be here today for the unveiling at St. Anskar's of the State Historical Marker to commemorate Gustaf Unonius, New Upsala and the Scandinavian Parish.

In order to fully appreciate the accomplishments of Gustav Unonius and his fellow Swedish settlers in Wisconsin, it is important to take note of the difficult environment which he and his fellow countrymen faced upon arrival in this beautiful area. In September 1947, State Assemblyman Alfred Ludvigsen of Hartland wrote an article discussing how the first Scandinavian group settlement in what is now Waukesha County, was established in 1839. It consisted of 40 Norwegians under the leadership of Johan Nelson Luraas. They came from Tin in the upper Telemarken and settled in the vicinity of Muskego lake.

Conditions were harsh for these early settlers, and there is an ample record of the ravages of disease. C.L. Clausen, a young Danish Lutheran minister, conducted the first of 54 funerals over four months the day after being ordained on October 19, 1843. The conditions that existed in the colony demanded a great deal of self-sacrifice. "Privation and want, suffering and sorrow almost beyond human endurance was the lot of these pioneers", wrote Ludvigsen. The entire colony came near being wiped out in 1849 and 1850 by cholera. Many that survived decided to move away.

The mid 1800's in Europe was a period of political and economic turmoil, and Sweden was no exception. The Swedish population had grown significantly and lands for farming were scarce. Economic hardship, and at times famine, were drivers to emigration, and many sailed to America in search of better lives. So it is that Gustav Unonius made the decision to embark and sail to the United States.

The year was 1841 when the First Swedish Settlement in Wisconsin was established, not far from where you are standing.

Gustav Elias Marius Unonius, with his bride, Charlotta Margareta Ohrstrommer, her servant, Christine Sodergren, and two friends, Carl Wilhelm Polman and Carl Gustaf Groth, booked passage on the "Minnet" from Gavle, Sweden, landing in Milwaukee via New York, Buffalo and Detroit, on October 4.

On October 7, guided by countryman Olaf Gottfrid Lange, who had come to America a few years before, the men set off on foot, taking food, guns, ammunitions, and a letter of introduction from the land office to Mr. Pearmain of Delafield. Leaving the women behind, they followed the "Forest Trail", now roughly Highway 16, in search of a homestead. They finally came upon a log cabin which was a settler's home and Inn owned by the Pearmain's. The next morning Pearmain lead them along the Native American trails to Pine Lake.

Unonius, who kept a diary, said:

"At last, we came to the shores of one of the most beautiful of the many lakes we had seen on our trip. It was called Pine Lake, in the Indian language Chenequa, for the reason that the Pine, which as a rule does not grow in this part of Wisconsin, was found growing there in company with the red cedar in one or two places on the shore." Unonius and Groth picked adjoining quarter sections as homesites.

As was the case with many new immigrants, Unonius wrote letters to his relatives and friends in the old country, generically called "America Letters", describing the wonders of this new land. These letters were often published in Swedish newspapers, and in Norwegian periodicals, tempting many countrymen to follow him to this new world he called New Upsala, after the university town of Uppsala, from where he had graduated at age 20.

Unonius told us that their work was slow to construct a cabin. They needed logs cut, dragging them to the site on the shores of Pine Lake. Along the way they invited settlers to a house raising. Thus on October 29, 23 settlers raised the cabin in one day which had one door and two window openings. A stove and various cooking items brought from Milwaukee kept them warm and provided cooked food. The generous neighbors brought flour, potatoes, cows, and pigs in the following months as offerings, or exchanged them for something else.

Unonius said:

"Our home! How much does not lie hidden in the word, even though the home consisted of a small, incomplete cabin without floor, door, chairs, or even a table, only a large room with openings here and there through the rough log walls. Still it was

a house, the first of our own since we had left our parental roofs and gone out into a strange world. It was a home built by our own hands, and though it lay far away in a foreign land, it was the home of our imagination, it was the goal of our ambition. It was the haven of rest after many months of nomadic existence with its wearisome restlessness, trials and disappointments... a home, ready to receive the finishing touches, and though most modest in its pretensions, was rich, rich in love, rich in friendship, rich in faith in God that He would extend His blessing over our roof. It was our home; it was our New Upsala.”

The same beauty that attracted Unonius and other immigrants to Pine Lake, led to increased population over the decades. By the early 20th century hotels became destinations for medicinal spring waters and lake recreation. Dance halls and taverns brought more commercial development.

Robert Elias Friend, who was born unexpectedly at Pine Lake in 1886, had concerns about the rapidly increasing development in the area. He set out to protect Pine Lake and its immediate vicinity. In the summer of 1921, Robert singlehandedly went door to door, performing a herculean task, convincing over 90% of the riparian owners to restrict their deeds to prevent overdevelopment.

Thus began discussions to create the Village of Chenequa, incorporated in 1928, codifying these restrictions. Robert Friend's diligence ensured that one of the pristine lakes in the area remained similar to when its original settlers came over 183 years ago.

It is not possible to speak about Gustav Unonius without mentioning his religious faith and how it continues to impact our community to this day. St. Anskar's Episcopal Church is a worthy, living and vibrant heir to the dedication of these early settlers. It is the reason we are gathered here today.

On behalf of the residents of the Village of Chenequa, I am proud to be here today for the unveiling at St. Anskar's of the State Historical Marker.

Thank you!

*Jo Ann Friend Villavicencio,
President, Village of Chenequa June 1, 2024*