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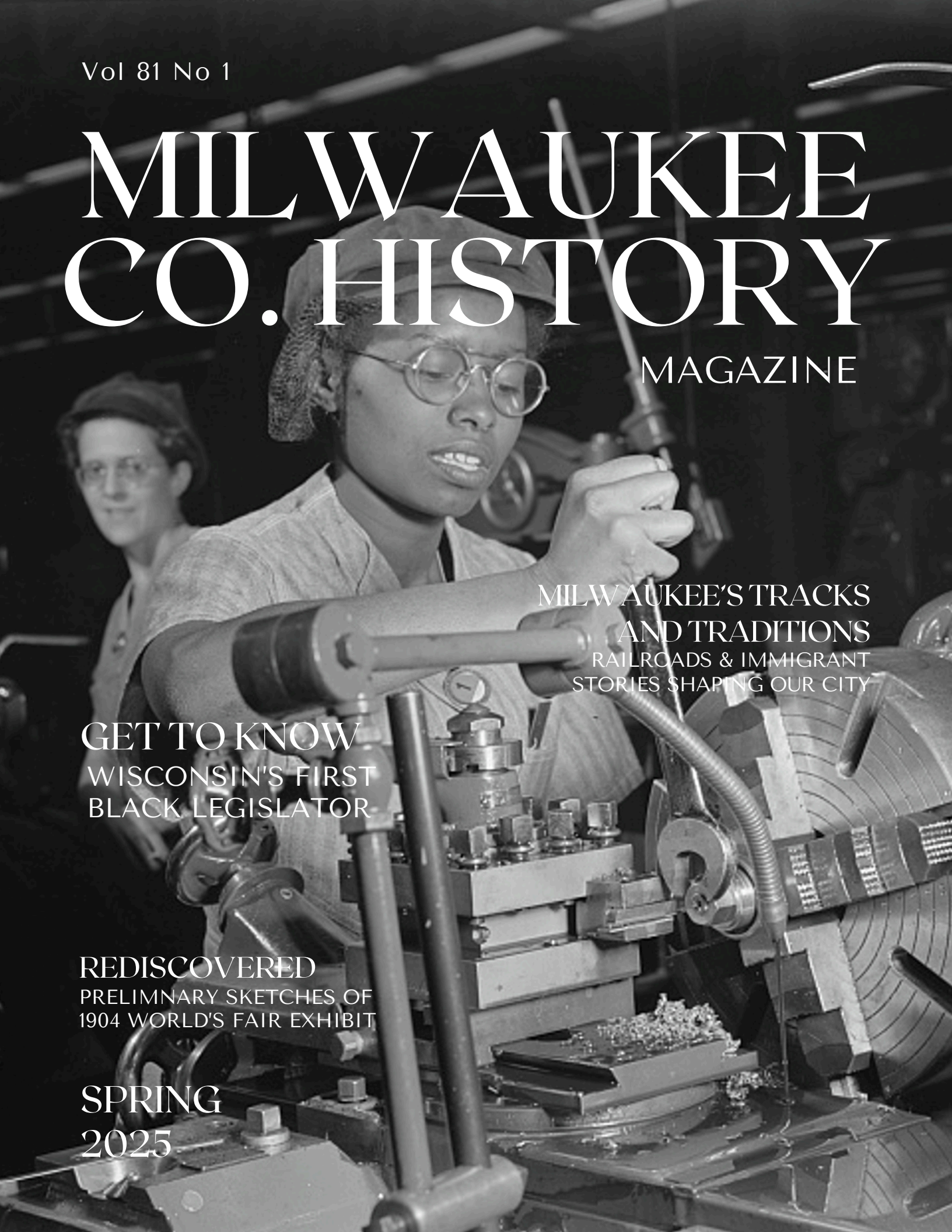
MILWAUKEE CO. HISTORY

MAGAZINE



MILWAUKEE'S TRACKS AND TRADITIONS

RAILROADS & IMMIGRANT STORIES SHAPING OUR CITY

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REDISCOVERED

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SPRING 2025

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On the Cover
20-year-old Annie Tabor, Allis Chalmers Corporation. Photograph, circa 1940s. Allis Chalmers Corporation Collection, Milwaukee County Historical Society Archives.

From the Executive Director

Dear Reader,

Late winter can be dreary in southeast Wisconsin, but here at MCHS we have been working hard as we look forward to spring and warmer weather. Here are just a few of the things that we have been up to.

- As we work to be the best local history resource possible, we are seeking feedback from the community through the annual Museum Goers Survey and Museum Social Impact Study.

- We are also working toward our Annual Awards Dinner, and we are especially excited about the new Janice and Stephen Marcus Public Art Award. There were public nominations for twenty-five unique works that our esteemed jury narrowed down to a final three. The winner will be announced at a public event at MCHS on April 16, with the award being conveyed at the Awards Dinner on May 22.

- We are improving our exhibits with a reinterpretation of the Benjamin Church (AKA Kilbourntown) House at Estabrook Park and an extended and revamped *Meet MKE* exhibit at MCHS.

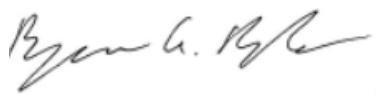
- Our programs are going strong including favorites like monthly Milwaukee history trivia, Building Bonanza Family Day, and before too long we'll be returning to the water with our History Kayak Tours. Also, our Oral History Program is collecting amazing interviews that will be available soon.

- The Research Library has been busy serving researchers, processing collections, and as of late assessing records at Milwaukee County buildings slated to be closed.

- Youth education is going strong with our extremely successful Hands on History program, and before long spring field trips will be returning to Trimborn Farm.

This is just a sample of all that we do. Information on all of the above and more can be found on our website (www.milwaukeehistory.net) and social media.

As always, we appreciate the support of our members and community members, and hope to see you at a program, exhibit, or on the water soon.



EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

LUCIAN PALMER

Wisconsin's First African American Legislator

By Lindsey Draper

Lucian H. Palmer, first African American elected to the Wisconsin Legislature, circa 1907. Photograph. Courtesy of Wisconsin Historical Society, WHI-34888.

As part of its observance of Black History Month, on February 27, 2008, the members of the Wisconsin State Senate adopted 2007 Senate Resolution 21, honoring the 1906 election of Lucian Palmer to the Wisconsin Assembly. The resolution recognized Palmer as the first African American elected to the Wisconsin legislature and noted he had the distinction of being the only African American elected to the legislature until Assemblyman LeRoy Simmons was elected to the State Assembly in 1944.

Wisconsin trailed other states in the Midwest in its election of an African American legislator, following Illinois (1877), Ohio and Indiana (1880), Michigan (1893), and Minnesota in 1899. [Voters in Iowa did not elect an African American legislator until 1965].[1]

In the election of 1906, Lucian Palmer, a local citizen who had built a solid reputation in the hospitality field, sought to represent Milwaukee's Sixth District, an area of the city centered in the downtown Third, Fourth, and Seventh Wards. A November 6, 1967, Milwaukee Journal article noted that most African Americans residing in Milwaukee at the time lived in the old Sixth and Tenth Wards, not those that would be represented by Palmer.

Lucian Palmer was born in Huntsville, Alabama, on March 12,1855, and was orphaned at the age of seven. He later moved with an older sister to Nashville, Tennessee, where he attended public schools. Palmer furthered his education at Central Tennessee College, a historically Black college founded by Methodist missionaries to serve freedmen, which later became known as Waldron University.[2] Palmer graduated in 1876, the same year the college established a Medical Department that became the first medical school in the South for

Wisconsin Building, a quaint old English Villa, World's Fair, St. Louis, 1904. Photograph. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, LOT 11043-9W.

African Americans. In 1915, it received a charter as Meharry Medical College.

Following his graduation, Palmer migrated to Chicago where he worked at the Grand Pacific Hotel, a luxury hotel built after the Great Chicago Fire. He reportedly managed Lakeside Resort in Pewaukee, Wisconsin, before moving to Milwaukee in 1878. Between 1883 and 1893, he built a diverse career in hospitality, insurance, and real estate, successfully running his own catering business until the Panic of 1893.[3]

Palmer spent roughly a decade working as a steward at the Milwaukee Yacht Club, a position which brought him into contact with many influential city residents. He held that position until he resigned to assume other roles, including a position as steward in the Wisconsin Building at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair. At the time of the 1906 election, Palmer was working as steward at Pasadena Flats located at 803–811 E. State Street and was an active member of St. Mark's African Methodist Episcopal Church and Prince Hall Masonic Lodge. Palmer ran as a Progressive Republican and his primary opponent was the incumbent Democrat Thomas Ramsey, a former member of the Milwaukee Common Council, who had been elected to the Assembly in 1904.

Following an active campaign, anchored by weekly meetings in the office of Attorney William T. Green – the first African American graduate of the University of Wisconsin Law School and attorney admitted to the Wisconsin State Bar – Palmer prevailed in the election.

The following are the reported vote totals:

Lucian Palmer (Progressive Republican): 1668

Thomas Ramsey (Democrat): 1601

Joseph Sultaire (Social Democrat): 507

Lyle Walker (Prohibitionist): 89[4]

Palmer's election caused considerable reaction across the state. The November 6 *Janesville Daily Gazette* reported:

> *One of the surprises in the Wisconsin election was the victory of Lucian H. Palmer, colored, over Thomas Ramsey, an assemblyman, in the richest district in Milwaukee city. Palmer is the first colored man to go to the state legislature and so far as known is the first of his race to get any public office in Wisconsin. He is a caterer and made a hard personal canvass.*[5]

Closer to home, the *Wisconsin Weekly Advocate*, a local African American publication founded in 1898, proclaimed "Race Recognition at Last" in its November 8, 1906, edition as it reported the election of Palmer.

In contrast to the pride exhibited by members of the African American community, many other Milwaukeeans regarded Palmer's election as a fluke, believing that the majority of the voters in his district were unaware of his race.

Thomas Ramsey. Photograph published in *Blue Book of the State of Wisconsin,* 1909.

This perception persisted for decades, as reflected in later analyses. In a November 6, 1967, article, the Milwaukee Journal attempted to explain the election of Palmer by indicating that while "Some of his wealthy friends from his yacht club days had homes in his district which may have have helped, …his election…was generally credited to a misunderstanding by the voters, many of whom thought they were voting for a prominent white mason."

Charles Frederich of the Milwaukee Journal Madison Bureau, in a February 7, 1988, article, referred to the 1906 election as a time when "a fluke brought the first black to the Wisconsin legislature."[6]

Similarly, in a February 8, 1993, article in the Milwaukee Sentinel, Tina Burnside reported: "They apparently had him confused with a prominent white man of the same name who was a member of the Masons fraternal order."[7]

Regardless of what factors contributed to his election, Lucian Palmer was the victor and was slated to be sworn in as an Assemblyman in the legislature. However, his opponents attempted to block him from taking his seat. Residents of the district for which hehad been elected representative indicated they had affidavits that he was a valet for a man in another ward and not entitled to represent the district. Also opposing Palmer were residents of his own neighborhood who demanded that Palmer "leave there and move back to the place called Darktown, whence he came."[8]

When some residents asked that Palmer be evicted from his residence and thus denied an address within the district, his landlord refused to do so, indicating "he guesses that Mr. Palmer is as good or better a tenant as some others he could name."[9]

In January 1907, Palmer was sworn in as the first African American assemblyman in Wisconsin history and served one term. Noted among his efforts during his time in office were a fight for a resolution seeking a thorough investigation of the Brownsville Affair hat resulted in President Theodore Roosevelt ordering the dishonorable discharge of 167 African American soldiers from the United States Army, as well as extending an invitation to an African American speaker to deliver a racial justice address in the assembly chamber.[10]

In his 1988 article characterizing Palmer's election as a fluke, Friederich also reported that "The voters caught on to their' mistake,' making Palmer's legislative career a brief one. He served only one term of two years." Although Palmer sought the Republican nomination for return to the legislature in the 1908 election, he was defeated in a three-way Republican primary by Chauncey Yockey who, himself, was defeated in the general election by Thomas Ramsey.

Following his service in the legislature, Palmer remained active in the Milwaukee community, particularly in his roles as a trustee at St. Mark African Methodist Episcopal Church and as a Freemason. Upon his death at home on February 17, 1923, Palmer was interred at Arlington Park Cemetery in Greenfield, WI.

Lindsey D. Draper is currently Chairman of the Board of Directors at St. Charles Youth and Family Services and the Alma Center in Milwaukee; a member of the Board of Directors of the Milwaukee County Historical Society, and on the cabinet of the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee Graduate School; a Director-at-Large of the National Client Protection Organization (NCPO), a member of the American Bar Association (ABA) Center for Professional Responsibility Continuing Legal Education and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Committees. He currently serves as Chairman of the ABA Standing Committee on Public Protection in the Provision of Legal Services.

Endnotes

1."Black Members of the Wisconsin Legislature: and Overview," Jillian Slaight and Isaac Lee, Legislative Reference Bureau, Wisconsin History Project, Vol. 4, No. 1, p,2, footnote 11.
2.Wisconsin Historical Society, https://wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Image/IM34888
3.The Negro in Milwaukee: A Historical Summary, Milwaukee County Historical Society (1968).
4."Election Returns Milwaukee County," Milwaukee Journal, p.8, November 7, 1906.
5."Colored Man Wins the Majority in Milwaukee," Janesville Daily Gazette, November 7, 1906.
6.Charles Frederich, "Blacks travel rough road to Capitol," Milwaukee Journal, p. 27.
7.Tina Burnside,"Blacks now hold more political clout," , Milwaukee Sentinel, p.6 February 8, 1993.
8."Milwaukee Women War on Negro Solon," Minneapolis Journal, Editorial Section p.2, December 9, 1906.
9-10. Ibid.

A Trip to *Jerusalem*

By Janean Van Beckum

Heine, Fredrich Wilhelm. Watercolor and ink on paper likely completed at the Chapel of the Apparition of the Virgin in Jerusalem, 1903. Milwaukee County Historical Society Collection, 2024.1.599.

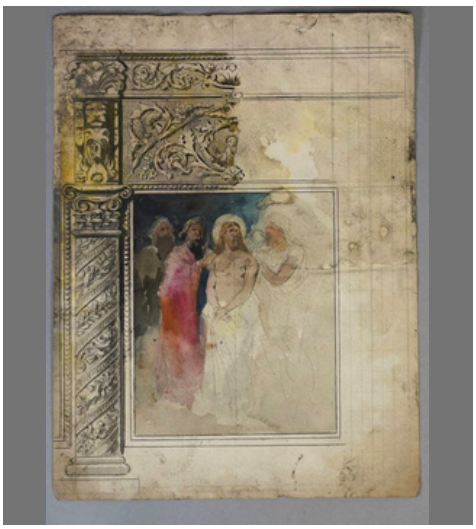
Have you ever come across a news article about a museum re-discovering an artifact they didn't know they had? It sounds odd that things would get lost in a place tasked with organizing and preserving history, but it happens all the time. Moves between storage facilities, storage re-organization, and even transferring data between collection management databases are all opportunities for things to get "lost".

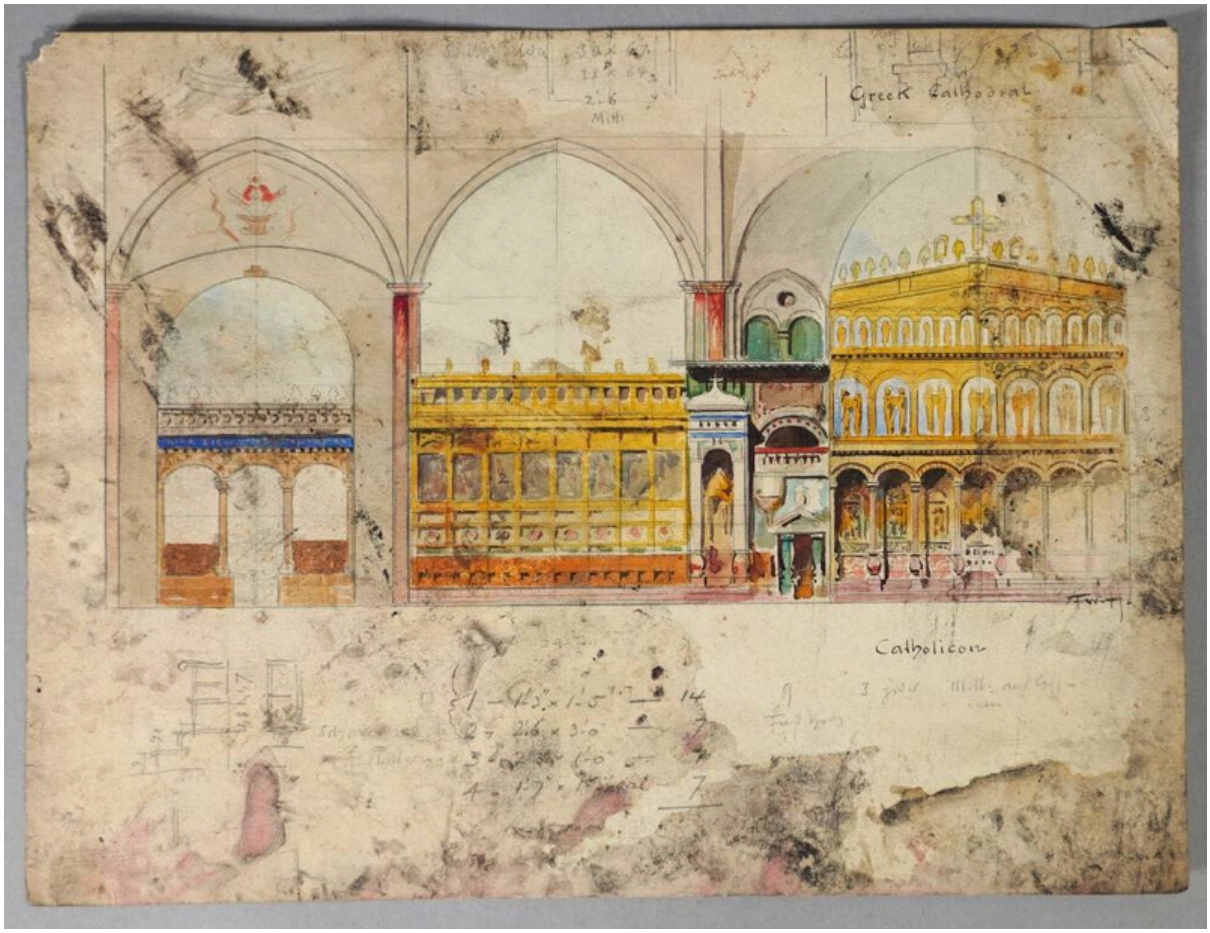
When these "lost" artifacts are re-discovered, it is a wonderful opportunity to dig a little deeper into their history and showcase them to the public. This is the case with the Frederich Heine and George Peter sketches featured here.

A few months ago, this collection of watercolor sketches was re-discovered at our offsite storage. Signed by Frederich Heine and George Peter, two artists active in Milwaukee at the turn of the 20th century, these sketches are from their 1903 trip to Jerusalem.

Heine and Peter were born in Germany and recruited by the American Panorama Company to come work for the company in Milwaukee. The company only lasted from 1884 to 1887, but Heine, Peter, and several other panorama painters stayed in Milwaukee, opening studios, teaching, and continuing to create panoramas under other company names. Many of you will be familiar with Peter's work as many of his panoramic paintings are featured in current Milwaukee Public Museum exhibits.

Heine, Fredrich Wilhelm. Watercolor and ink on paper, 1903. Milwaukee County Historical Society Collection, 2024.1.587.





Heine, Fredrich Wilhelm. Watercolor and ink on paper depicting the interior of the Greek Cathedral in Jerusalem, 1903. Milwaukee County Historical Society Collection, 2024.1.583.

The trip to Jerusalem was undertaken by Heine and Peter as a reconnaissance mission of sorts. They were contracted to create murals for the 1904 Louisiana Purchase World's Fair in St. Louis. A 10-acre plot of the fairgrounds was set aside for a Jerusalem exhibit. This exhibit recreated the walled section of the city, including the stations of the cross, the Mosque of Omar, and the Wailing Wall. The Jerusalem Exhibit Company, who created the attraction, even imported people from Jerusalem to "live" in the exhibit in an attempt to create an authentic experience.

There are 51 pieces in the collection. The sketches are not perfect, finished pieces of art. They have small rips, stains, smears, and handwritten scribbles, evidence of the working artist. I love imperfections like this on artifacts. They show use and the creative process. It is evidence that the creators are just like us and lend humanity to the pieces.

Janean Van Beckum holds a BA and MS in Anthropology with a focus in Archaeology and a Certificate in Museum Studies from the University of Milwaukee. She has worked for nearly 20 years in museums and archives, the majority of which have been local history organizations.

Page 10 (Top to Bottom Right)
Peter, George. Watercolor and ink on paper, 1903. Milwaukee County Historical Society Collection, 2024.1.616.
Peter, George. Watercolor and ink on paper, 1903. Milwaukee County Historical Society Collection, 2024.1.620.
Heine, Fredrich Wilhelm. Watercolor and ink on paper, 1903. Milwaukee County Historical Society Collection, 2024.1.579.
Peter, George. Watercolor and ink on paper, likely depicting the interior of the Mosque of Omar in Jerusalem, 1903. Milwaukee County Historical Society Collection, 2024.1.614.
Heine, Fredrich Wilhelm. Watercolor and ink on paper, 1903. Milwaukee County Historical Society Collection, 2024.1.572.

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From People to Policy

Exploring the Immigration History of Milwaukee County

By Olivia Hoff

In October 2024, the Milwaukee County Historical Society began "The Immigrant Experience in Milwaukee County" Oral History Project. This project seeks to capture stories from immigrants, naturalized citizens, and those who have been marginalized due to U.S. immigration policy in Milwaukee County. The goal is to foster a better understanding of the immigrant experience in the United States, the political, social, and environmental factors that led people to settle in Milwaukee, and what it means to be a U.S. Citizen.

The project will culminate in an exhibit opening in 2026 that will explore the history of U.S. immigration through the personal stories from the immigrant populations of Milwaukee County. Additionally, these oral histories will be archived in the Milwaukee County Historical Society Digital Archives to preserve the stories for future generations of researchers, students, and community members. Let's dive into a survey of immigration policy to better understand the history of immigration to Milwaukee.

The history of immigration in the United States begins over a century before July 4, 1776. The United States was founded on land that was and is still inhabited by Indigenous peoples from multiple nations. Furthermore, the United States could not have been built without the exploitation of enslaved

Amiskquew, a Menominie warrior. Drawn, printed & col. at the Lithographic & Print Colouring Establishment. , ca. 1843. Philada.: Published by Daniel Rice & James G. Clark. https://www.loc.gov/item/95502208/.

people. African people were kidnapped and forcibly brought to the U.S. to be enslaved for generations. Many populations of people have immigrated to the United States before and throughout its existence. The first immigration policy, the Naturalization Act of 1790, federally recognized U.S. citizenship by process of naturalization, however this was only available to "free white persons" with two years of U.S. residency.

1600s–1860s, Indigenous Displacement in Milwaukee

Colonial rule and settlers violently displaced many Indigenous nations in order to expand territory and "make room" for Anglo-Saxon people to immigrate to and settle the young nation. In Milwaukee, the Ho-Chunk (Winnebago) and Menominee nations had been present for generations before French fur-traders arrived in the mid-1660s. However, during the expansion of the colonies, other Indigenous nations were pushed into Wisconsin as the land's first refugees, including the Iroquois, Chippewa, Sauk, Ojibwe, Odawa, Sac, Fox, and the Potawatomi. Indigenous resources were depleted, violence and warfare continued, and disease spread. In the 1830s, the Potawatomi were forcibly removed from Milwaukee. The 1862 Homestead Act and the aftermath of the American Revolutionary War solidified permanent European settlement on Milwaukee Indigenous land. It was not until the 1924 Indian Citizenship Act that Indigenous people could be considered citizens.

1845–1880s, First Wave of European Immigration to Milwaukee

As Milwaukee continued to develop, European immigrants came in waves. From 1845 to 1860, German immigrants began to populate Milwaukee, especially the north side which was nicknamed "German Athens." At this time, German immigrants were fleeing southwestern German states in search of prosperous agriculture and political freedom. After the second wave of German immigration (1865-1875) in 1880, native Germans made up 27% of the city's population, which was the highest concentration of a single immigrant group in any

German-Austrian-Hungarian Bazaar. Black and white photograph, 1916. Ethnic Groups Collection: German Americans (Schoenleber Collection), Milwaukee County Historical Society Archives.

American city. Irish immigrants also began to arrive in Milwaukee in the mid-1840s to escape the Irish Potato Famine. The Irish made up about 14% of Milwaukee's population in 1850. These early immigrant groups made up Milwaukee's workforce during the transition from grain production to industrial manufacturing of steel and iron.

1880s–1890s, Second Wave of European Immigration to Milwaukee

From the 1880s through 1890s, Milwaukee saw Polish, British, Scandinavian, Serbian, Italian, and Jewish immigrants settling in Milwaukee. The Polish population was the second largest ethnic group in Wisconsin. Polish immigrants were in search of freedom in political and cultural expression, which was discouraged by both the German and Russian governments. Many of the Italian immigrants who arrived in Milwaukee came from Sicily and southern Italy. In Milwaukee, these immigrant groups continued to develop the economy by serving as the workforce in the meatpacking, tanning, brewing,

flour milling, and steel industries. By 1890, 86% of Milwaukee's population comprised residents born outside of the U.S. and their children. At the time, Milwaukee was known as the most "foreign" city in America.

During this time, the U.S. government began to implement stricter immigration quotas and exclusions to control the "type" of immigrants entering the country. Milwaukee, and the United States overall, saw a very small percentage of immigrants arriving from Asian countries during this period. The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act banned Chinese and Japanese immigrants from entering the country and prevented those already here from becoming citizens. Additionally, the Immigration Act of 1882 and 1891 expanded the list of excludable and deportable immigrants to include "public charges, persons suffering from disease, felons, and aliens assisted by others by payment of passage." These policies were strictly enforced by opening the Ellis Island Immigration Port in 1892, which acted as a detention center for migrants waiting for medical evaluation. Ellis Island allowed the government to monitor who was entering the country and enabled the enforcement of exclusionary policies.

1900s-1940s, "The Great Migration" of African Americans, North Eastern European, Arab, and Latine Immigration to Milwaukee

Black Americans were granted equal treatment and birthright citizenship with the passing of the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868. Additionally, the Naturalization Act of 1870 extended naturalization rights to "aliens of African nativity and to persons of African descent." African Americans have been a part of Milwaukee's population since the city's inception in the 1840s. Black Milwaukeeans were actively involved in Milwaukee's economy, press, and political landscape. The black community of Milwaukee faced Jim Crow segregation. Despite this, the State was pushed to pass the Wisconsin Civil Rights Act of 1895, which banned racial discrimination in public establishments. By 1900, there was about 900 Black people living in Milwaukee. This number grew rapidly after World War II. This growth is attributed to the Great Migration. Black communities migrated from the south to escape racial violence and to pursue economic and education opportunities in the north. In 1920, Milwaukee's Black population was around 2,000 people. By 1945, 10,000 Black Americans called Milwaukee County home. It is important to note that African American voting rights were not federally protected against discrimination until the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Voting in all U.S. elections in a crucial benefit of U.S. citizenship.

From the 1900s through the 1920s, Greeks, Slovaks, Russians, Syrian, Lebanese, and Mexican immigrants arrived in Milwaukee. Most Arab immigrants came from the Greater Syria region – Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, and Isreal. By 1915, 800 Syrians were living in Milwaukee. Syrian immigrants earned a living by peddling dry goods, which later developed into small businesses including grocery stores, meat markets, and fruit stands. Milwaukee's State Street had around fifty Syrian-owned businesses by 1909. Mexican immigrants, known as Los Primeros (The First), arrived in Milwaukee in 1920 as a recruitment initiative by Pfister and Vogel Tannery to replace their striking workforce.

20-year-old Annie Tabor, Allis Chalmers Corporation. Black and white photograph, ca. 1940s. Allis Chalmers Corporation Collection, Milwaukee County Historical Society Archives.

During and after World War I, the U.S. government established more immigration restrictions and anti-immigrant rhetoric spread. The 1917 Immigration Act established the Asiatic barred zone, which prohibited immigrants from India, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. The 1924 Immigration Act established "national origin" quotas to limit immigrants from "non-white" countries entering the United States.

1945-1960s, "The Bracero Agreement," Mexican Migration and Immigration

From World War II through the 1960s, Milwaukee's Mexican immigrant population grew as a part of the Bracero Agreement (1942-1964). The U.S. and Mexican governments created the Bracero Agreement and recruited male Mexican workers to the U.S. on short-term contracts in agriculture and war-time industries. The agreement was extended by Executive Order No. 8802 to include protection of the Mexican workers from discrimination. However, from 1953-1954, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) deployed, "Operation Wetback," military-style tactics and racial profiling to deport Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans. This was the largest mass deportation in U.S. history. One year prior, the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 ended racial restrictions on citizenship. The Immigration Act of 1965 abolished the quota system and created a system of preferences for immigration access: Family Reunification (75%), Employment (20%), and Refugees (5%).

1970s-1990s, Waves of Refugee Immigration to Milwaukee

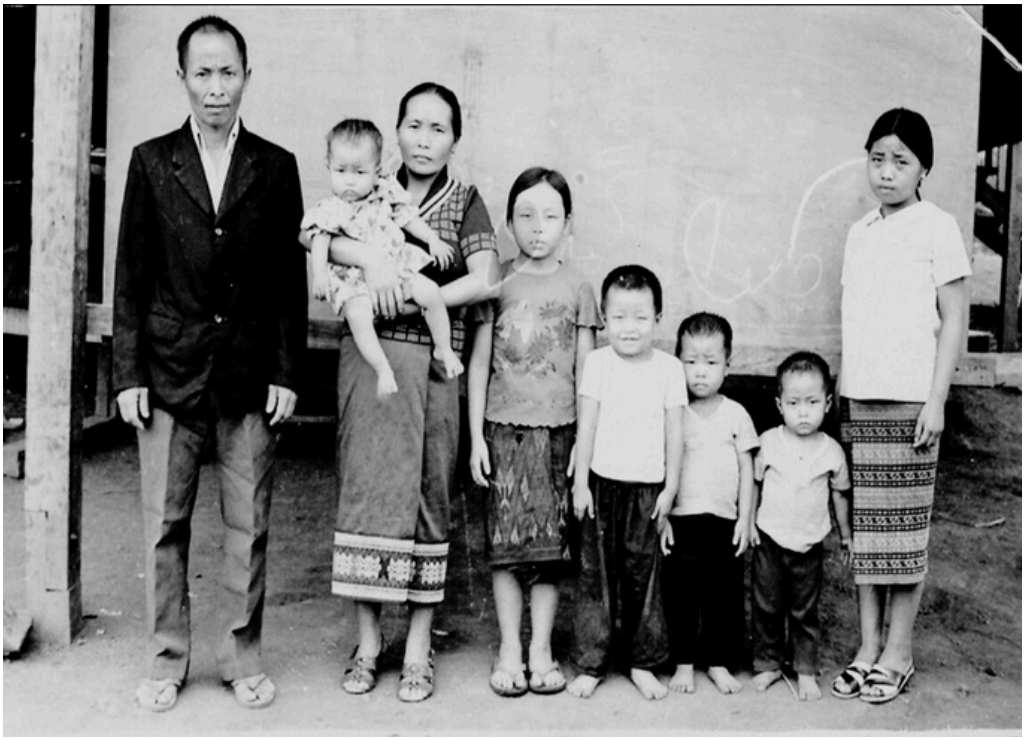
During the 1970s to 1990s, Milwaukee's immigrant population saw a large wave of refugees settling the community. Hmong refugees were escaping violence and war within their home country of Laos. Due to Hmong allyship during the Vietnam War, the U.S. enacted the Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act (1975), which brought around 135,000 Southeast Asian refugees to the United States. Additionally, in the 1990s, Milwaukee was home to refugees from Somalia, Puerto Rico, Cuba, El Salvador, Columbia, and Nicaragua seeking refuge from war and political oppression within their respective countries.

1990s-Present Day

From the 2000s to present day, Milwaukee continues to see immigrants from around the world. Most recently Somalian, Burmese Rohingya, Ukrainian, and Afghan refugees have been seeking resettlement in Milwaukee. The Burmese Rohingya are a Muslim ethnic group in Myanmar (formerly Burma) who have been facing religious persecution by the Myanmar government since 2017. It is estimated that 2,000 Rohingya live in Milwaukee, more than in any other city in the United States.

No matter the era, immigrant groups have sought opportunity - work, education, and freedom from persecution. The history of U.S. immigration policy helps us understand the greater context of each wave of immigration. Although the reason for immigration remains constant, the policy surrounding immigration shows us the levels of difficultly different groups faced. Many groups have been and continue to be marginalized based on their race, religion, and/or political affiliation. As Milwaukeeans, we can learn and understand our immigration history to ensure that we do not make the same exclusionary mistakes of the past. Immigrant groups continue to be a part of Milwaukee's community as educators, community leaders, business owners, the workforce, friends, and neighbors.

Church of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Black and white photo, ca. 1950s. Church Collection: Roman Catholic, Milwaukee County Historical Society Archives.



Her Family, Ban Vinai Refugee Camp, Thailand. Black and white photograph, 1975. Courtesy of Chris Her-Xiong.

To understand the history of immigration in Milwaukee County on a personal level, we would like to share an exclusive segment transcribed from one of our oral history narrators of "The Immigrant Experience in Milwaukee" project, Dr. Chris Her-Xiong, CEO and Founder of the Hmong Peace Academy in Milwaukee. Dr. Her-Xiong immigrated to the United States at the age of ten with her family and other Hmong people escaping political oppression and ethnic cleansing.

"I remember, as a child, being cold and hungry all the time during the escape from Laos to Thailand and living in the refugee camp. And then eventually, my dad decided that there was no hope in the refugee camp for us. And so, he made the courageous decision to take our family to the United States." Dr. Her-Xiong's story is an example of the trials refugees go through to immigrate to the Unites States.

Olivia Hoff holds a Masters of Public History degree with a Museum Studies certification from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, earned in 2021. During her graduate studies, she interned with the MCHS in exhibit development and hosted The Healthiest City podcast, a collaborative production by UWM and MCHS. In Spring 2024, Olivia began her role as Programs Manager at MCHS, where she focuses on program development, community engagement, and overseeing the Oral History Program.

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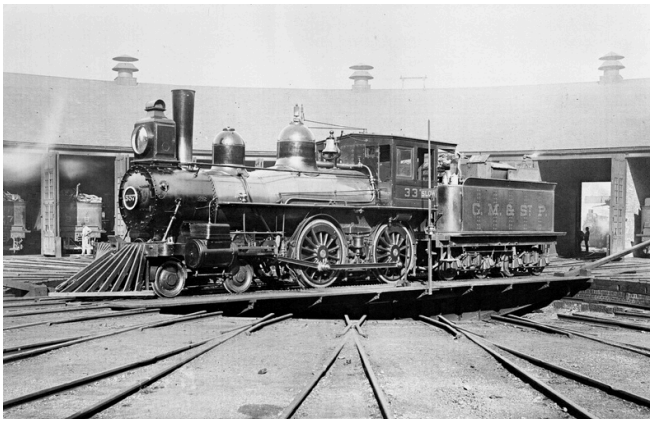
MILWAUKEE RAILROAD HISTORY

The Milwaukee Road and the North Western in Milwaukee

By Michael Barera



Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul Railway engine #337 on a turntable. It was built in 1893 in the railroad's own shops. Photograph. Milwaukee County Historical Society Archives.

The first railroad in Milwaukee was the Milwaukee and Waukesha Railroad, which was founded by Milwaukee pioneer Byron Kilbourn and later renamed the Milwaukee and Prairie du Chien. It began laying down track in 1850, reached Waukesha by 1851, Madison by 1854, and ultimately the Mississippi River at Prairie du Chien in 1857.[1, 2] The Milwaukee and Waukesha built the first train station in the city at the corner of 2nd Street and Fowler Street (now St. Paul Avenue), just three blocks east of the current Milwaukee Intermodal Station. It was a simple, unadorned, two-room station.[3]

In 1852, after being fired by the board of directors of the Milwaukee and Prairie du Chien, the irrepressible Kilbourn established the La Crosse and Milwaukee Railroad. This new railroad built its line through Horicon, Beaver Dam, and Portage before ultimately reaching La Crosse on the Mississippi River in 1858.[4, 5] This route would eventually become the Milwaukee Road's main line from Milwaukee to Minneapolis-St. Paul. Today, this trackage is actively used by the Canadian Pacific Kansas City (CPKC) and Amtrak.

Milwaukee was connected to Chicago by rail in 1855 and to Minneapolis-St. Paul by 1867. Milwaukee became a major center for transporting wheat, as well as corn, lumber, and coal.[6] Observing how the new railroad infrastructure so well complemented existing water-based shipping, Karen W. Moore writes that by 1863, "this highly efficient rail-water shipping trade had transformed Milwaukee into the wheat capital of the world."[7]

Also in 1863, banker and railroad financier Alexander Mitchell reorganized the La Crosse and Milwaukee as the Milwaukee and St. Paul Railway, which was commonly known as "the Milwaukee Road" long before it became an official trademark of the railroad in 1953.[8] By 1865, Mitchell already owned almost half the railway miles in Wisconsin.[9] In 1867, he also acquired the Milwaukee and Prairie du Chien, by which point his growing railroad empire included both of Kilbourn's pioneering railroads.[10, 11] In the words of railroad historian and author H. Roger Grant, "Mitchell's network of railroads transformed Milwaukee into a hub for shipment of wheat from Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Iowa on such a scale that it rivaled Chicago."[12]

Mitchell's railroad continued to grow, reaching Chicago in 1873, adding the city to its name in 1874, and moving its general office there in 1890.[13, 14] The Milwaukee Road then expanded west through the Upper Midwest and northern Great Plains, and reached Washington's Puget Sound by 1909.[15]

Milwaukee Road Class A 4-4-2 locomotive #1 leaving Milwaukee Union Depot. Photograph, circa 1940s. Milwaukee County Historical Society Archives.

AT THE TURN OF THE 20TH CENTURY, IT [THE MILWAUKEE ROAD] WAS THE LARGEST SINGLE EMPLOYER IN MILWAUKEE...

In 1880, the Milwaukee Road opened its West Milwaukee Shops. By 1938, Milwaukee Road employees had built almost 700 steam locomotives in-house there. Under the innovative leadership of chief mechanical officer Karl F. Nystrom, the railroad shops also built freight and passenger cars in an era when most railroads purchased them from companies that specialized in such work.[16] The Milwaukee Road also built its iconic Hiawatha streamlined trainsets at these shops in the 1930s.[17]

The neighborhood of Merrill Park, located close to the shops, developed as a residential area for shop workers, who numbered 1,200 by 1883.[18] There were multiple generations of Merrill Park residents who worked for the Milwaukee Road.[19] By 1947, roughly 3,500 people worked in the Milwaukee Road's shops, although employment declined to roughly 900 in the late 1970s and to only 225 in 1983, shortly before the shops were closed.[20]

In 1886, the Milwaukee Road opened its dramatically designed station at 317 W. Everett Street, which featured a prominent 140-foot-tall clock tower. The station was designed by famed Milwaukee architect Edward Townsend Mix primarily in the Gothic Revival architectural style.[21, 22] Author and historian Kim Tschudy describes this station as "providing a grand entrance to Milwaukee."[23]

By 1900, the Milwaukee Road included over 6,500 miles of track in its system.[24] At the turn of the 20th century, it was the largest single employer in Milwaukee, with 5,500 employees. By 1927, its roster of employees had expanded to 8,000, and chairman of the board Harry E. Byram announced its payroll was $12.5 million that year (over $223 million today), which he claimed was the largest in the city at the time. [25]

In 1935, the Milwaukee Road launched its flagship Hiawatha passenger trains.[26] The Milwaukee Road also utilized its main line and branch lines, along with its large Menomonee Valley classification yard, as the backbone for fast and efficient freight service. In 1963, the railroad began operating its Thunderhawk and XL Special freight services, which briefly claimed the title for fastest service between Chicago, Milwaukee, and the Pacific Northwest.[27]

The Milwaukee Road, like its rival Chicago and North Western but at a larger scale, carried coal, grain, and lumber into Milwaukee and beer, machinery, and other goods out of it. They both benefitted from major businesses in the city and county in the early to mid-20th century, especially Allis Chalmers, Froedtert Malt, Krause Milling, and the "Big Four" Milwaukee breweries: Blatz, Miller, Pabst, and Schlitz.[28] At its peak in the 1970s, the Milwaukee Road had over 10,000 miles of rail running from the Midwest to the Pacific Northwest. It came to be known and celebrated for both its passenger and freight service, the capabilities of its shop, and the work of its employees.[29]

The Milwaukee Road filed for bankruptcy for the third and final time in 1977, drastically reducing its workforce, slashing its system length to just over 3,200 miles, and abandoning its Pacific Extension in the process. On December 31, 1985, it was acquired by the Soo Line Railroad, which in turn was acquired by the Canadian Pacific Railway (now part of CPKC) in 1990.[30, 31]

The Chicago and North Western Railway (C&NW or simply the "North Western") traces its Milwaukee-area heritage to two early-1850s lines that connected Chicago to Milwaukee: the Illinois Parallel Railroad and the Green Bay, Milwaukee, & Chicago Railroad. Those two lines were consolidated as the Chicago & Milwaukee Railway (C&M) in 1863. The North Western, which itself was formed in 1859, began leasing the C&M in 1866 and officially acquired it as part of its own system in 1881. From that point, the North Western entered direct competition with the Milwaukee Road on the Chicago to Milwaukee corridor.[32]

In 1882, the North Western connected Milwaukee to Madison. In 1911, it completed a high-speed route between Chicago, Milwaukee, and the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul.[33]

In 1889, the North Western opened its grand Lake Front Station, designed by architects Charles Sumner Frost and Alfred Hoyt Granger. Costing $200,000 (over $6.9 million today) to build, it was constructed of stone in the Romanesque style at the east end of Wisconsin Street (now Wisconsin Avenue) along Milwaukee's lakefront, on the site of the present-day Betty Brinn Children's Museum. At its zenith, it served 98 trains per day.[34, 35, 36]

By the outbreak of World War I, the North Western had nearly 10,000 miles of track, making it one of the largest railroads in the country. Long renowned for its passenger operations, the North Western connected Milwaukeeans to Chicago, the Twin Cities, and Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Between 1930 and 1933, the North Western even allied with Kohler Aviation Corporation to offer commercial flights between Milwaukee and Grand Rapids, Michigan.[37]

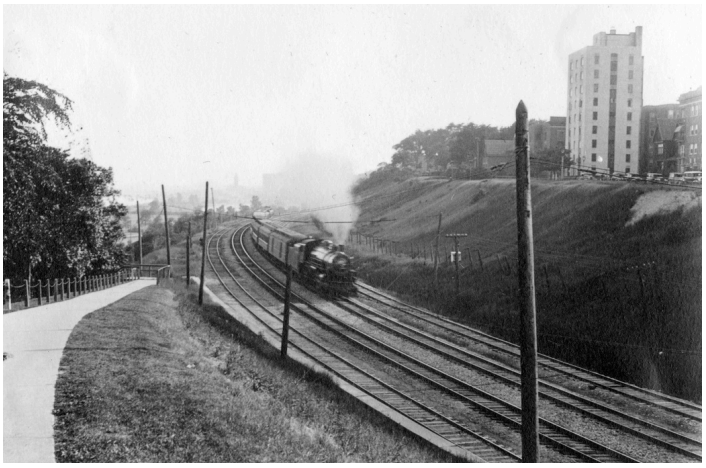
Despite the railroad entering receivership during the Great Depression, in 1935 it introduced its most famous passenger train, the 400. This train was named for the time (in minutes) and distance (in miles) it took to travel between Chicago, Milwaukee, and the Twin Cities. Originally powered by steam, the *400* was dieselized in 1939 to reduce costs. Its brand value proved so great that other North Western passenger trains began using it, such as the *Peninsula 400* and the *Flambeau 400*.[38]

The North Western began to cut back on its passenger services after its bankruptcy and again after World War II, slashing it drastically in 1956.[39] Like the Milwaukee Road, it faced increasing competition from cars, trucks, and aircraft. This occurred in an environment in which the government subsidized both roads and aviation but did not subsidize railroads, all while still tightly regulating them, continuing to treat them as the monopolies they clearly were during the Gilded Age.[40] However, freight traffic on the North Western (especially coal shipments from Wyoming) remained strong and kept it in business.[41]

In 1972, under the administration of Ben Heineman, the North Western was sold to its employees, with the former management citing higher competition from automobiles, labor costs, and regulation as their rationale. Despite the challenges, the railroad stayed profitable during this period where it proudly incorporated the words "Employee Owned" into its insignia.[42] It acquired other railroads, including the Minneapolis & St. Louis and the Chicago Great Western, while also seriously considering a merger with the Milwaukee Road that never happened.[43] Its trackage (especially connections from Nebraska to Chicago) was desirable to other railroads, and the North Western was ultimately acquired by the Union Pacific Railroad in 1995.[44]

This article is adapted from Michael Barera's new Transportation in Milwaukee Part 1: Steel Wheels and Shipping presentation, now available through the MCHS Speakers Bureau.

Michael Barera has been the Assistant Archivist and Digitization Specialist at the Milwaukee County Historical Society since June 2022. He is also a Milwaukee resident who is passionate about the city and county's history, especially its industrial heritage and transportation history. Michael has over nine years of full-time experience as an archivist, including at the University of Texas at Arlington Libraries (2019-22) and at East Texas A&M University (2015-19). A native of Ann Arbor, Michigan, he is twice a graduate of the University of Michigan (BA '12, MSI '14).



A North Western passenger train running along Milwaukee's Lake Michigan shoreline on the railroad's Chicago to Twin Cities mainline in 1932. Photograph. Milwaukee County Historical Society Archives.

Endnotes

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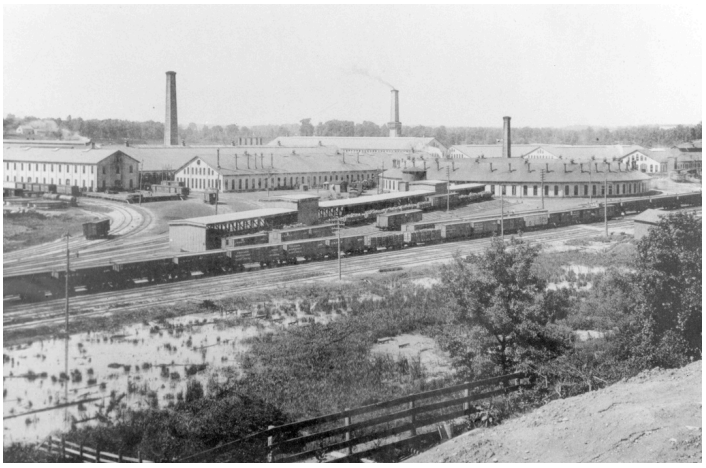
The Chicago and North Western Railway's lakefront depot. Photograph. Milwaukee County Historical Society Archives.



The Milwaukee Road's West Milwaukee Shops. Photograph. Milwaukee County Historical Society Archives.

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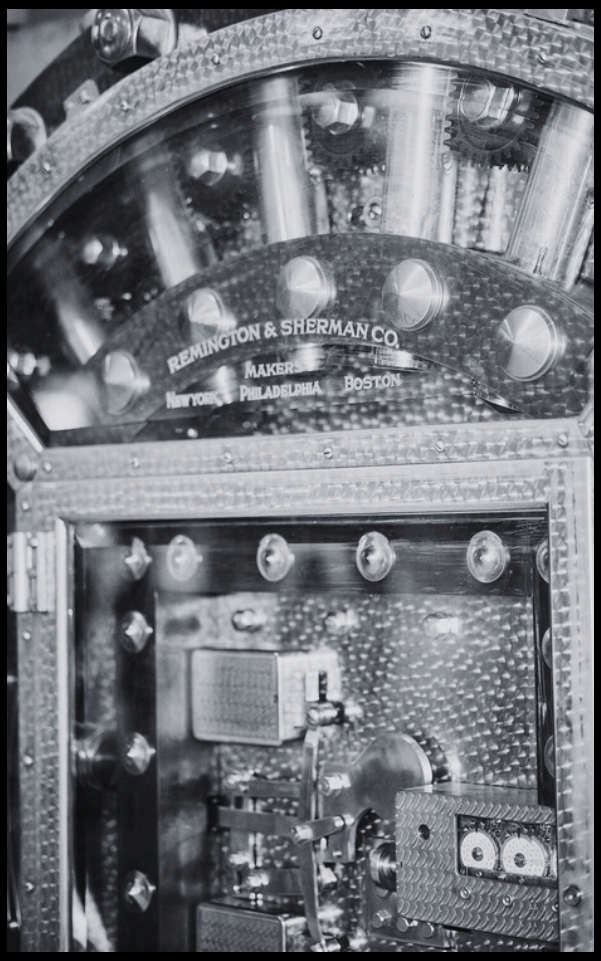

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