

Gratiot's Grove – Early Wisconsin Settlement

By Cory Ritterbusch – originally appearing in the *Voice of the River Valley* magazine

The word, *Terroir*, includes many elements. One not to be overlooked, is *people*. Wisconsin's earliest inhabitants shaped our architecture, our community's locations, their place names and their economies. Perhaps no place is better used as a model than Wisconsin's oldest American settlement, Gratiot's Grove. Located just South of Shullsburg in LaFayette County. Here French-Canadians, Native American, French speaking Swiss, Yankees and "suckers" from Southern Illinois co-existed around an economy reliant on mineral lead. This influential short-lived community rippled across subsequent generations and still can be found in living vignettes today.

Gratiot's Grove was founded in 1825 by brothers Henry and Beon Gratiot. The land, purchased from Winnebago tribe's men in 1826, was the state's first land survey. In 1827 a "Lead Rush," similar to the 1849 California Gold Rush was in full swing. The population of Gratiot's Grove grew overnight. Many French speaking Swiss families from the Selkirk Community from the Red River of North Dakota joined. While Yankees from the East, acting on speculation came too. By 1828 there was a general store a warehouse and three trips per day delivering lead ore to riverboats.

The Gratiot Family was one of the most prominent in the early Middle West. Researching their family line is like reading the development of the early American West. When Henry entered the Lead Region, Winnebago Indians petitioned for him to serve as their agent with the Federal Government. Hostilities were high among the white man at the time. The Gratiot's were well connected and tribesmen were well aware of it. Henry and Beon's brother Charles was the "engineer in chief" for the U.S. Army and a West Point graduate. Four Gratiot sons and five daughters all helped shape the American expansion West in some capacity during

the 1800's. They lived a rich provincial life on the frontier.

Population estimates of "The Grove" vary from several hundred to 1,500. The population was spread around the Gratiot homestead. The population was extremely diverse including; the Gratiot's children, their African American servants, French Americans with kin ties to several Native American groups, French speaking Swiss, Anglos, and local Winnebago. These people found Gratiot's Grove more conducive to negotiation than the Anglo dominated and more organized, Galena. The American 'melting pot' was certainly on display here.

In 1829 Fortunatus Berry came up from Illinois and began to farm. Perhaps, the first farming activities in the state began at this time. With so many entering the area, Mr. Berry constructed a crude hotel for new settlers to the area. It served as a post office, the third in Wisconsin. With construction of a government funded stage road. Berry built a new "commodious" hotel and tavern in 1840. It became a post office, school, center of entertainment and the site of many early religious ceremonies. The first Methodist sermon given in the state of Wisconsin was held at his tavern.

However, Gratiot's Grove was challenged during its short history. The wars of 1827 and 1832 stalled growth and its landlocked location in the hills didn't help matters. In 1836 Henry Gratiot died returning from Washington D.C. representing Indian interests. By 1845 the post office at Berry's Tavern had moved to Shullsburg where Jesse Shull had established a smelter. Soon all of the settlements in the area consolidated into what is modern day Shullsburg. The Winnebago did not forget the Gratiot's, continuing to visit Susan Gratiot and later her daughter Adele as late as 1860.

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A complete study of Gratiot's Grove could take longer than the settlement existed. However, many factoids stand out which prove the influence the flash community retains to this day:

- Among the settlements citizens was a young man employed by the Gratiot family named Peter Rindisbacher. He would be renowned for his paintings of Native American life, creating a genre.
- A murder that occurred at 1842 ball at the Berry Tavern resulted in the hanging of killer William Caffee at Mineral Point. It is believed Caffee's ghost haunts the Walker House in Mineral Point today.
- Henry Gratiot's Grandsons include Stephan Hempstead, first Governor of Iowa and namesake of Hempstead High School in Dubuque.
- Among the families joining the Gratiot's from St. Louis to 'The Grove' were the Chetlain's. Augustus Chetlain went on to serve as Union General in the Civil War. Today a man named Kevin Melencon of Galena portrays Gen. Chetlain.
- Henry Gratiot's son-in-law, Elihu B. Washburne, was a highly influential Congressman from Galena, a close advisor of President Lincoln and assisted General Grant in becoming President Grant. His wife Adele Gratiot's ability to speak French, from her days at Gratiot's Grove, helped him considerably when he served as U.S. Ambassador to France.
- Shullsburg High School, a Romanesque structure still in original use, was designed by Henry Gratiot's Grandson, C.C. Gratiot in 1900. His wife, Dr. Mary Gratiot, was a pioneer woman in the medical field. Serving as the town physician for 50 years.
- French Missionary Priest Fr. Samuel Mazzuchelli held Catholic services in Gratiot's Grove. In 1993, Pope John Paul II declared Mazzuchelli 'venerable,' to potentially being canonized a Saint.
- Today at least one Shullsburg City Councilman can trace his ancestry back to the Selkirk Community and wave of immigration to 'The Grove' in 1826.

The only remaining physical remnants at 'The Grove' are *The Gratiot House*, a stone house, soon to be a bed and breakfast, and The Berry Tavern. In 1914 a granite monument was placed in front of The Berry Tavern to mark its historic location. In 2013, The Berry Tavern was purchased by individuals concerned about its future. Now *The Friends of Berry Tavern* is raising money and awareness to ensure that the structure remains for another 175 years.

It is easy to look at the settlement of Gratiot's Grove today and dismiss the cornfields, pastures and overgrown woodlands as deep history left only for historian bliss. But when able to see the connections to the present day- this human *terroir* becomes alive and part of the fabric in which we live.