
DANE COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER



Volume XXIV

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Number 3

Madison's Earliest Letter

The Madison Post Office was first established on February 3, 1837. However, it was not in operation until May 27, 1837 out of Eben Peck's house.

How many letters have been mailed from Madison since that day? It would number in the billions and billions.

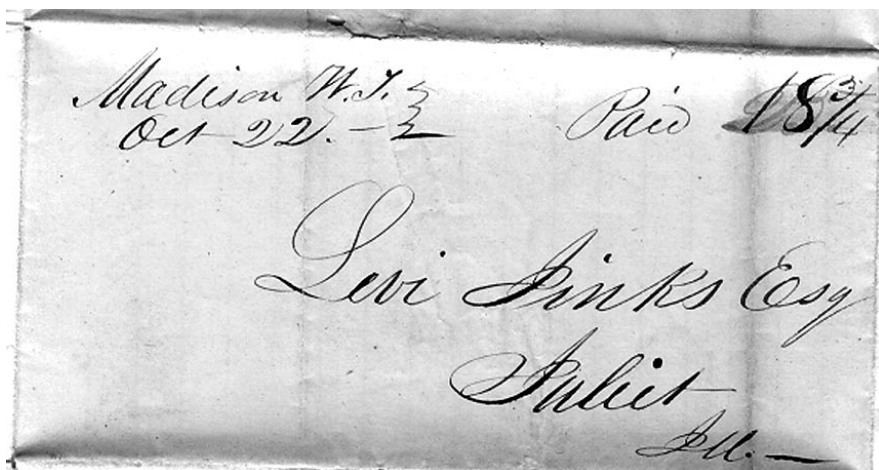
This stampless, folded letter mailed on October 22, 1837, is the earliest postal marking yet found from the Madison Post Office. It is owned by a private collector in Madison.

The letter was written by Simeon Mills, Madison's first merchant and the Deputy Postmaster. The rate was 18³/₄ cents, which was the rate for up to 400 miles at that time. It was very expensive to mail a letter compared to the 32 cents we now pay.

Simeon Mills first arrived in Madison on the afternoon of June 10, 1837, after walking from Chicago via Janesville.

Mr. Mills said, "A portion of the way, I followed Indian trails, which finally led to the outlet of the Third Lake (Monona), where I found two Indian boys fishing. I could speak no Winnebago and they no English. I pointed across the lake, and finally, through the medium of two half dollars as interpreters, I made them understand that I wished to be taken over. The contract was soon closed, and they finally landed me about sunset, on the (opposite) shore (where the East Madison Depot was later built). This, I said, shall be my life-long home."

After deciding to make Madison his home, Simeon proceeded to build a small house, where he would spend the winter before having his wife join him in the spring. While living in Madison that fall, Simeon wrote the letter



Stampless, Folded Letter from Simeon Mills, dated October 22, 1837, Madison, W.T.

which is pictured above.

The letter was sent to Levi Jinks in Joliet, Illinois and in it, Simeon asks if any taxes were owed on his lots in Joliet. He also added, "I shall spend the winter at this place and expect to become a permanent resident here. Madison, the seat of government, is one of the most lovely and enchanting places I ever saw. It bids fair to make a town of some importance."

If Simeon could only see it now!

Read about Simeon Mills and see the letter on page 2.

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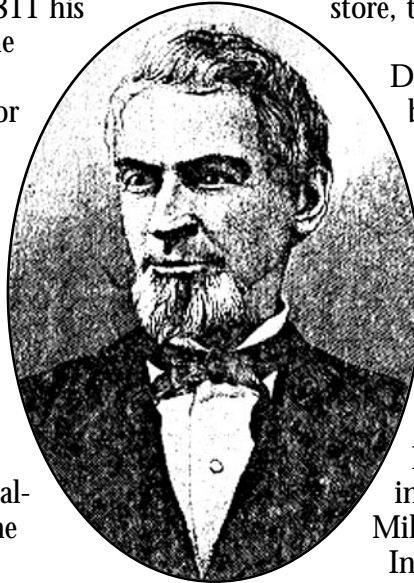
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Simeon Mills - Writer of Madison's Earliest Letter

Simeon Mills was born in Norfolk, Connecticut on February 14, 1810. His grandfathers were both soldiers in the Revolutionary War. In 1811 his father moved to Ohio and was one of the pioneer settlers in the northeast part of that state. At twenty he taught school for a brief period. In 1834 he married Maria Louisa Smith. He first set foot in Wisconsin at Green Bay in the Spring of 1835 on his way around the upper lakes to Chicago.

On June 2, 1837 he started on foot from Chicago with only a carpet-sack on his back. Traveling through the sparsely populated wilderness, much of the way on Indian trails, the first white man to view much of the country, he finally arrived the morning of June 10th at the opening to the 3rd lake (Lake Monona).

When he arrived, Madison consisted of one log house, Eben Peck's and the body of the log house without a roof on the spot where the old post office was. This belonged to John Catlin, who had started it in the



early spring, before the Peck house was built. Mills built a small 14 X 16 foot combination house and store, thus becoming Madison's first merchant.

On July 4, 1837 he was appointed Deputy Postmaster and his house also became the post office. Although Madison's post office was established in February of 1837 it was not in operation until May 27, 1837 out of the Peck house. During the fall of 1837 and winter of 1838 John Catlin was at the second session of the legislature in Burlington, so Mills would have been in charge of the post office when this letter was sent in October of 1837. Mr. Mills also secured the contract for carrying the mail between Madison and Milwaukee until July 1, 1842.

In June of 1838 he brought his wife from Ohio to join him in Madison.

In August of 1837 he was appointed Justice of the Peace of Dane County. He was a county commission-

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Dear Sir
 Madison Dane Co. Wt.
 Oct 22nd 1837.
 Last fall or winter I wrote you requesting you to let me know whether there were any taxes charged on any of my Lots in Delist and if so to let me know the amount (or perhaps I requested you to pay and I would forward you the amount) - but having never heard from you I concluded that there was no Taxes due to me. But I have been informed this summer that some lots were advised to be sold for Taxes in my name last winter. The lots that I own and have an interest in are Lot no 7 in Block No 7th - School Sec - Lot no 4 in Block 7 in Bowers addition and Lot no 5 in 15 & 6 in Block no 5 in Campbell's part of the town. Perhaps I am mistaken as to the no. of the last mentioned Block, the lots lie on the upper corner opposite the Tavern on Chicago St.

These are all the lots with the exception of those purchased of Gilbert that I own or have any interest in. One of those I do not own but I wish to see the terms paid. I wish you to write to me whether there are any taxes now due or whether any of the lots were sold, and if so what

amount is necessary to redeem them, and I will forward you the money and pay you for your trouble.

I suppose that the amount that Mr. Adams and myself owed to Mr. Gilbert has been paid and the lot sold to satisfy the execution. I have the goodness to write and let me know how the matter stands and when the time of redemption expires. I shall spend the winter at this place and expect to become a permanent resident here - Madison the seat of Government is one of the most lovely and enchanting places that I ever saw - it bids fair to make a town of some importance.

You will please direct to Madison Dane Co. as there is a Post Office in Lee Sec and many of our letters get miscarried.

I have the goodness to reply immediately.

Yours Respectfully
 Simeon Mills

Records Center Highlights

“A Guide for Young Voters”

By Debbie Kmetz, Electronic Cataloging Project Coordinator

Individuals, families, organizations – even government units mark anniversaries with special events and programs. In 1948, the State of Wisconsin commemorated 100 years of statehood with a variety of programs, festivities and special projects. The Dane County Historical Society's Records Center counts among its publications one of these centennial projects: a rich, content-filled publication titled “A Guide for Young Voters: 1948 Dane County Citizenship Training Program.” It is the subject of this installment of Records Center Highlights.

This booklet measures 8-1/2” x 12”. It is modestly and attractively produced, sporting a cover of grey card stock illustrated with black pen and ink drawings. The hand-lettered words, “A Guide for Young Voters,” occupy the top of the page. Just below, in the center, a drawing of the Capitol dome appears over an outline of the state. A banner carrying the words, “Wisconsin State Centennial, 1848-1948,” visually ties the two images together. At the upper left, a team of oxen pull a covered wagon; to the right an airplane signals the modern era. Just below the wagon is a portrait of a woman, below the airplane is a portrait of a man.

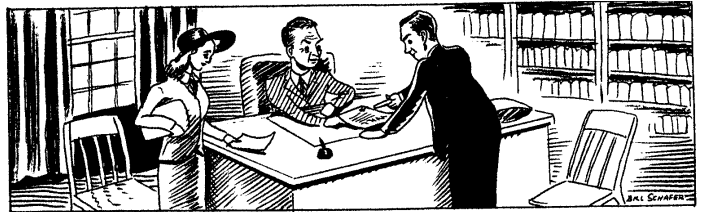
In the lower left half of the page, a sleek train travels through the arch of a highway's modern underpass. Beyond the train, in the near distance, smoke issues forth from factory smokestacks. A complementary scene on the right features a picturesque dairy barn and silo set against billowy clouds. The artist's signature, “Bill Schafer '48,” is tucked underneath the train tracks on the lower left.

The interior holds 59 pages of typewritten copy prepared by R. J. Colbert and produced by the University Extension Division of the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Bill Schafer contributed illustrations. Colbert, Director of Extension's Bureau of Community Development, explained the guide's origin in the foreword.

In 1939, the State of Wisconsin enacted legislation called the “Wisconsin Citizenship Training Law.” That law directed the superintendent of schools in each county to provide an annual program of education for new voters: those who had reached the voting age of 21 years and recently naturalized aliens. The law stated that the program would consist of “lectures, forums and other forms of instruction, allowing free and frank discussion, and conducted in a nonpolitical, nonsectarian, and nonparti-

san manner by qualified leaders selected by public school authorities.”

The law also charged school authorities with organizing teachers' institutes to prepare the leaders. The legislation noted that the school boards could contract with University Extension to conduct the institutes and citizenship training. The annual educational program would climax on the third Sunday of May, with Citizenship Day, “the occasion upon which Wisconsin citizens welcome said new voters into the electorate with appropriate ceremony.”



“The Dane County (Probate) Court.” Each of the profiles of Dane County elected positions is accompanied by a drawing done by Bill Schafer.

Colbert wrote that University Extension produced this guide for young voters as an instructional aid in citizenship training. The booklet provides a sound foundation in citizens' rights and responsibilities as regards voting and explains the functions of county government in a straightforward and thorough way. But the text does more. It also provides readers today with a sense of the meaning of citizenship in Wisconsin in the mid-20th century.

In the foreword, Colbert also observed that during the past 100 years of statehood, democratic self-government had become more and more complex with increased government functions and responsibilities. “Today Government plays a major role in the daily life of every citizen, and an increasing part of our standard of living is made possible through governmental services.” He explained that the day's voters needed a more comprehensive understanding of governmental issues than was required of the voters of the past.

Recognizing the need for a more informed citizenry, the Wisconsin Legislature had determined that adult education could help new voters keep abreast of the sheer number and complexity of civic issues. These issues, of

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Records Center Highlights (*Continued from page 3*)

course, could range from development of new highways to questions of school consolidation to upkeep of the County Fair Grounds. Colbert regarded this resulting citizenship training program as “another illustration of Wisconsin’s leadership in matters of good government.”

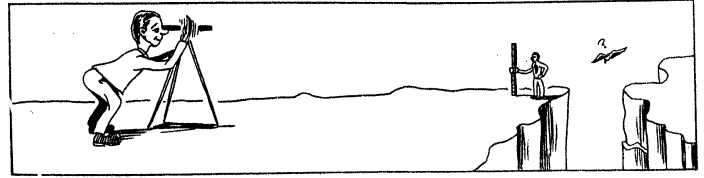
University Extension produced this booklet against the backdrop of the Great Depression and World War II. Memories of both would have been quite keen for many Wisconsinites. During the Depression, the federal government launched economic recovery programs that touched citizens’ lives in many ways including the distribution of relief in the form of staple foodstuffs and the creation of employment opportunities resulting in wide ranging and enduring projects such as reforestation, construction of recreation areas, and documentation of local history and culture. The role of government had, in fact, increased to save citizens from hunger and to “put the country back to work.”

World War II drew thousands of Wisconsinites into service, many of whom gave their lives to preserve democracy. In the booklet’s, “Welcome to New Voters, 1948,” Dane County Board of Supervisors Chairman Paul A. Robinson acknowledged this as he wrote, “We, the senior voters of Dane County, consider it a privilege to welcome you, the new voters in this centennial year, as our partners in public affairs. We not only look to you young citizens to defend our democracy in times of war, but we depend upon you to maintain and build our democracy ... through active participation in the functions of its government, local, state, and national.”

Though the foreword and welcome provide important background information and set the tone for the guide, they occupy only a few pages. The majority of the text is devoted to the very practical information about the workings of government. That instructional content consists of four major sections.

The first section, “Voting in Wisconsin,” covers ten pages with material on voter qualifications, absentee voting, nomination of candidates, voting and conduct of elections, and important dates to remember. Though much of the process and many of the procedures remain the same today, it is interesting to note some intriguing details. For instance, in 1948, the September primary as well as the November election were legal holidays throughout the state.

The information on “counting ballots” relates that after paper ballots were counted and the votes tallied, state law required that they, “be strung on wire and sealed in canvas bags and brought to the office of the county clerk within two days after the election.” This section also contains information about new developments in voting technology



“The County Surveyor.” Bill Schafer’s cartoon-like and sometimes light-hearted illustrations tend to interject an element of informality into the guide.

– the voting machine then being installed in some municipalities. A full page is devoted to a diagram of a voting machine. Readers are advised that voters are allowed a “reasonable” length of time in the voting machine – and no less than one minute.

The booklet’s second section, “Dane County Government, 1948,” profiles each of the county’s elected positions including administrative offices, judges and school officials. Each profile was written by the person holding the office and is accompanied by a pen and ink drawing by Bill Schafer.

Paul A. Robinson wrote about the functions of the Dane County Board of Supervisors at a time when the county had no full-time chief executive. Most of the executive duties fell to the Board Chairman and the County Clerk. In addition to presiding over the board of 82 members, the chair also, with four other members, appointed all the committees of the board; was chair of the audit committee; had the power to examine, settle and allow accounts or claims against the county; and was an ex-officio member of the County Agricultural Committee which was charged with promoting the agricultural interests of the county. These are but partial listing of the chair’s duties.

Austin H. Johnson wrote that since the County Clerk, “is the office to which one naturally comes with inquiries of every nature, it probably comes more directly in contact with the public than any other county office.” He explained that the County Clerk served as secretary of the county board, issued licenses and permits, recorded medical and basic science certificates, and had extensive duties regarding elections, the county budget, tax apportionment and more.

As the official who authorized marriage licenses, he observed that the “rush” months were usually May, June and August. He also wrote that 1943 was an all-time high record for Dane County when 2,095 couples applied for marriage licenses.

Johnson also described the Dane County Dance Hall Ordinance noting that the County Clerk issued the permits for dances held outside of the boundaries of cities

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Records Center Highlights (*Continued from page 4*)

and villages. "A fee is charged for each permit and dance inspectors are employed and paid out of this fund."

County Treasurer Julius Kelly emphasized that the treasurer is very much "a servant of the people" and was required to furnish a "faithful performance" bond. He wrote, "While the various taxes and state aids constitute the bulk of monies collected directly by the treasurer, all collections by all county departments, including the courts, must be brought to, and deposited with the county treasurer."

Sheriff Edward Ace Fischer described the Sheriff Department's fleet of two-way radio cars equipped with first aid kits, fire extinguishers, ambulance facilities, flares and more. He wrote about cooperation with other law enforcement officials such as constables and marshals and recent occasions when as many as 35 two-way radios were in use among various officers. Fischer also offered the opinion that law enforcement was being increasingly regarded as a profession "requiring thorough training and extensive technical training."

Judge Douglas Nelson noted that the Wisconsin Legislature established the Small Claims Court for Dane County in 1945. The court began work on July 7, 1947. The purpose of the court was to handle small complaints of \$200 and under. Previously, those types of complaints were addressed by a justice of the peace who was paid by a fee system. He wrote that the small claims court was seen as an improvement over the earlier system where the fees could seem burdensome when compared to the amount of the complaint. During its first year of existence, the Small Claims Court averaged 175 cases per month.

The other county positions addressed in this section include District Attorney, County Surveyor, Register of Deeds, Coroner, Clerk of the Circuit Court, County (Probate) Court Judge, Superior (Juvenile) Court Judge, Circuit Court Judge, the County Superintendent of Schools and Supervising Teachers.

The publication's third section provides interesting organizational charts for various units of government including general charts for the school district, town government, and village government and specific charts for the Cities of Madison and Stoughton, the State of Wisconsin and the federal government. The chart for Dane County government notes 35 towns, 23 villages, 2 cities (24 wards). It also lists the Board of Supervisors' 27

standing committees including Highway, Airport, Fair Grounds, Education, Conservation, Safety, Radio, Welfare and Lakes Investigation.

The final section of the booklet addresses political parties and also suggests discussion questions for the students and teachers meeting in the citizenship forums. Readers today may find some of the discussion questions relating to local issues particularly interesting such as, "Should the rural schools of the county be consolidated?" and, "Should the heavy through-traffic be routed through the city, or should a 'belt-line' be constructed to route such traffic around the city?" The suggested forum questions also explored fundamental principles of American government such as, "What standards should be recognized as a basis for upholding the bill of rights?"

This booklet provides an in-depth and comprehensive look at government at the county level. That level was chosen, according to Colbert, "because it is in the county government that the new voter is most likely to get the best and most fruitful opportunities for active participation in civic affairs. It was written in the years immediately following two great threats to American democracy – the Great Depression and the rise of fascism. Wisconsinites had seen the country navigate through the Depression, sometimes uncertainly, and sometimes against the prospect of national collapse. Fascism posed a chilling threat, repulsed only with the sacrifice of many lives. The commemorative and reflective year of 1948 was a time to hold democracy especially dear and look with gratitude, seriousness and optimism to those new voters who would carry on the weighty yet rewarding responsibilities of citizenship. As Paul A. Robinson writes, "We are welcoming you young people as voters in whom we have every confidence and whom we regard as fully qualified to carry on where we have but begun. We wish you every good fortune in assuming this new responsibility."

More Info Please!

Beverly Kneebone, Dane County Historical Society Treasurer, recognized "A Guide for Young Voters" as the text book from her Madison civics class. Does anyone else recall using this as a text in school? If so, please contact DCHS at (608) 224-3605 or by email at danecountyhistory@sbc.global

DANE COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER: The Dane County Historical Society Newsletter is published quarterly (Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter), with submissions due 15 days earlier. Reader reviews, testimonials, flak and flattery, are also welcome. Send to: Howard Sherpe, Editor, DCHS Newsletter, 1017 Chieftain Lookout, Madison, WI 53711. E-mail: skjerpe@chorus.net

Dennis Bitterlich, President, DANE COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Dane County Historical Society presents:
STORIES from FORWARD!
“Early State Roads”

The first roads in Dane County connected Blue Mounds to the lead district to the southwest. A road ran west to Mineral Point by way of Dodgeville. Another ran south along the ridge in the Town of Perry to Blanchardville, and west to Fretwell's Diggings in Iowa County, while one ran north from Blue Mounds to the Wisconsin River, and west to the shot tower at Helena. A Military Road connecting Fort Howard at Green Bay, Fort Winnebago at the Fox-Wisconsin portage, and Fort Crawford at Prairie du Chien had been widely promoted by Doty and others in the 1820s. When it was finally constructed by the army under order of Congress after the Black Hawk War, other routes had become more popular, and the impact of the Military Road was minimal.

The territorial legislature was eager to attract newcomers, and understood the importance of decent roads for that purpose. As a result the legislature became the prime source for the funding of roadway construction in the county between 1836 and 1848. While construction of the first capitol building proceeded at Madison under the supervision of three appointed commissioners, the legislature also assigned one of the trio, Augustus A. Bird of Milwaukee, the task of building a road from Milwaukee to Madison.

In anticipation of population increases, the legislature mandated road-work requirements for all male town residents, as soon as a town incorporated. The statutes required that residents keep the roads in good repair and required all men between the ages of twenty-one and sixty to labor on those roads two days a year. If their labor was insufficient or if they were unable to work, they paid a “road tax” of one dollar for each day their neighbors worked.

The state legislature mapped state roads throughout the county connecting outlying communities to the capital city. For many years, until funds became available to begin construction, the surveyors' stakes for such roads marked the only way for travelers to find their way to Madison. The far-sighted legislators at the first meeting in Madison in 1838 approved construction of a road from Fond du Lac by way of Fox Lake and then by the most direct route to Madison. They also called for a road from Big Foot at Lake Geneva to Madison by way of Walworth. Roads from Koshkonong to Madison gained approval, as did others



Figure 3-5: An example of a private planked toll road that passed through Dane County at the time of the "Plank Road Craze, " ca. 1846. SHSW, WHi (X3) 17696.8 (4).

from Racine, Beloit, Watertown, and Janesville. In each instance a group of commissioners selected by the legislature arranged for the survey of the route and its eventual construction.

Not long after statehood, several legislators, often acting on behalf of private investors, submitted plans for privately owned plank roads to serve the wagon traffic between Milwaukee, Madison and other cities. The existing gravel and clay roads were impassable much of the year, and developers believed that roads laid with oak planks would improve transportation, especially in the wet spring and fall months when farmers needed access to markets and mills. Maintained and operated by private companies, these roads were a solution for those transporting goods and willing to pay a modest toll.

The coming of the railroad ended the plank road craze. Plans for railroads and measures to incorporate them appeared in nearly every legislative session from the earliest days of the Wisconsin territory, but not until the 1852 and 1854 sessions, did the future of transportation, the railroads, finally arrive. The effect was rapid and thorough as investors moved capital away from plank road, and towards railroad, projects. The mere prospect of competing with rail freight lines forced road owners to lower their rates by half. Unable to compete, the wooden roads rotted away along with their owners' hopes for transportation monopolies to and from Dane County.

New Board Member - Mary Clark



Mary Clark, a lifelong resident of Dane County, joined the DCHS Board in August 2005. She was born in Madison and attended Madison Memorial High School; graduated from UW-Madison with a BA in American History; and received her Masters of Library Science from UW-Madison in 1977.

She has worked for the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, Reference and Loan Library since 1982. She currently, is the Head of Resource Sharing Technology for the library. Her team works on electronic resource sharing tools such as WISCAT, a statewide combined library catalog and BadgerLink, a collection of full-text resources available to all Wisconsin residents.

She has been volunteering with the DCHS since March of this year, helping to catalog the periodicals into PastPerfect.

Mary lives in the Isthmus of Madison with her husband, Glenn. They have one son and a new baby grand daughter. In her spare time, she enjoys reading, traveling, going to movies, scrapbooking, cooking and dining out with friends.

DANE COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Please renew your membership if you have not already done so. Your continued interest and support enables the Society to carry out its goal preserving Dane County's heritage for tomorrow's generation.

(Our fiscal year is May 1-April 30. Circle your choice.)

- Individual - \$12.00
- Family - \$18.00
- Contributing - \$40.00
- Sustaining - \$60
- Business/Professional - \$75
- Student- \$5.00
- Local Historical Society - \$25.00

Make your check payable to: Dane County Historical Society.

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P.O. Box 5003 • Madison WI 53705

The Dane County Historical Society has an office and archive room in the lower level of the Lussier Family Heritage Center, Lake Farm County Park at 3101 Lake Farm Road.

Phone: 224-3605

e-mail: danecountyhistory@sbcglobal.net

DANE COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY PRESENTS *FORWARD! A HISTORY OF DANE: THE CAPITAL COUNTY*

FORWARD traces the history of Dane County through the twentieth century. As home to state government, Dane County history provides background and insight into the development of Wisconsin throughout this period. The book was researched and written by Allan Ruff and Tracy Will. Tracy Will is well known to many Wisconsinites as one of the hosts of the popular television series, *Wisconsin Stories*, developed cooperatively by Wisconsin Public Television and the Wisconsin Historical Society. The first published history of Dane County in nearly 100 years is replete with fascinating details and rich graphics. It has over 400 pages of text, hundreds of pictures, complete index, maps, photos, and graphics enliven the text.

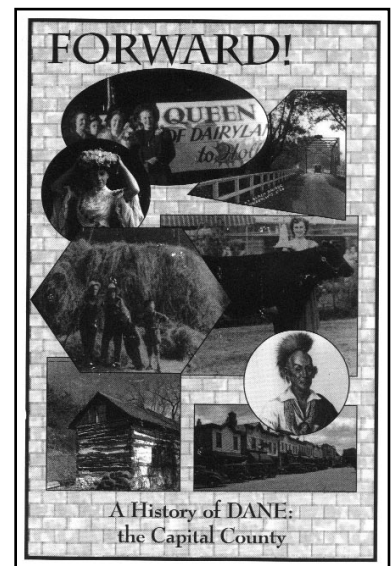
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If you wish to pick up the book in person to save shipping and handling charge, please call Anne Short (274-1960)

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Simeon Mills Letter
(Continued from page 2)

er and clerk of the court. He was one of the founders of the *Wisconsin Argus*. He was the first Senator for Dane County in 1848 when Wisconsin gained statehood.

He introduced the bill, enacted into law, which became the Charter of the University of Wisconsin, and was a member of the first board of regents, being instrumental in purchasing the site and superintending its first building.

During the Civil War he was appointed Paymaster-General by Governor Randall. He also helped develop the State Historical Society.

He and Mrs. Mills were parents of five children. He died on June 1, 1895 at the age of 85 and was buried in Forest Hill Cemetery in Madison.

Sharon Kilfoy Sesquicentennial Project

Dear Dane County Historical Society members,

I have received a grant from the Dane County Cultural Affairs Commission in celebration of Madison's 125th birthday in 2006. I plan to create a series of large size fabric collages which will include pieces of clothing, hats, belts, gloves, bits of jewelry and other artifacts collected from the community. These fabric collages, or "Fabrications" will be exhibited at the downtown Madison Public Library during the month of February 2006.

A written guide will accompany each piece, telling the story of the artifacts it contains. I am inviting you to contribute items for inclusion in this work. Whether your family has extensive roots in Madison, you were here during the turbulent 60's, or you arrived in Madison recently, your story helps create the tapestry of our town. Please call me at 256-8878 if you have questions, or to arrange to have me pick up an item and hear your story of life in Madison.

Thank you for your assistance.
Sharon Kilfoy

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