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James Doty

His determination and devious tactics
made Madison the state's capital

By JAY RATH

On Oct. 2, 1836, two men left Green Bay to travel on horseback 130 miles to a land a soldier during the Black Hawk Indian War had called “not fit for any civilized people to inhabit.”

They were about to create Madison.

One of the men was James Duane Doty, ex-judge, speculator and later territorial governor and congressional delegate. The other was a surveyor, J.V. Suydam.

“Gov. Doty gave me minute directions as to its plat, every item of which had originated with him, while there on the ground,” Suydam later recalled.

It is difficult, 170 years later, to gauge Doty. A friend, Appleton newspaper editor Samuel Ryan, called him “an all ’round man as the saying goes, and one whose integrity was ever beyond reproach.”

One of Doty’s other friends and

business partners, Michigan Gov. Stevens Mason, called him “a liar, a calumniator and a swindler.”

Doty was born in Salem, N.Y., in 1799. In 1818 he went to Detroit, where he practiced law, and in 1823 was appointed federal judge of the western Michigan Territory, which then included what would become Wisconsin.

Without Doty, it’s certain that Madison would not be the capital. It might not even exist.

Before him, the area was home to the Ho-Chunk, and was a wilderness so famous for being impenetrable that in 1832 Sauk Chief Black Hawk, whose homelands were along the Rock River south of Wisconsin and near the Mississippi, passed through the area when his band was trying to elude the Army of the Northwest. It worked. After Madison, it took the army almost a month to find them again.

But Doty saw something here. Beauty, yes, but something more.

As he wrote to a friend, “I think it is obvious that we can make something handsome out of this.”

With Mason, Doty bought 1,261 acres for \$1,500, laid out the Square and the streets, named it Madison, and set about making it real, making it the capital, and making himself rich.

Just 23 days after Doty’s survey, the first territorial legislature met at Belmont, which was serving as the provisional capital. There were a raftload of capital candidates, including Belmont, Green Bay, Milwaukee and even Dubuque — the territory was expansive. After 42 days, Madison won by one vote. It was a compromise; the site was between Green Bay and the lead mines, between the Mississippi and Lake Michigan.

Doty allegedly bribed delegates, but there were seven other nearby land speculators, with their own adjacent “paper cities” that they wanted chosen as capital, too; they included what later became Maple Bluff, east Madison and Monona. Madison speculators were a coalition, and they undoubtedly lobbied hard.

It was a different time. A Milwaukee newspaper from the period remarked, “It seems the impression has been made at Washington that an appointment to any office would not be acceptable to the people of the territory, unless the officer can get drunk, swear, or establish the fact by a treasonous oath that he has scalped a dead Indian.”

Doty stepped down from the governorship before his term was up in 1844. He was made territorial governor of Utah by President Lincoln in 1863 and died there in 1865. ■