Three Pioneer Women in Wisconsin

The Letters and Journals of Sarah Pratt, Lucy Hastings and Ann Eliza Bacon Porter

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Abstract:

This paper looks into the lives of three ordinary women, women who traveled to Wisconsin to start a new life, leaving the comforts of home behind. The new lives found by these women included pain and hardship, and still they found the strength to carry on. The women in this paper, Lucy Ann Hastings, Sarah Pratt and Ann Eliza Bacon Porter, represent women pioneers all over Wisconsin. This research helps fill a major gap in the history of Wisconsin, which is a detailed understanding of how different types of women from different backgrounds lived in Wisconsin.
Introduction and Thesis

During the middle to late 1800s settlers headed west to start new lives, leaving all of the comfort they had known behind. They traveled through forests, across oceans, prairies, and lakes. They endured many hardships on their journey and once they reached their destination suffered more hardships. Men and women traveled west, women sometimes came alone but more often they came with husbands or families. Many women were reluctant to leave everything that they had known in their past lives to settle in a faraway place where there were few neighbors, churches, schools or social events. There were a lot of things for these women to worry about including illness and accidents.

Besides all of the uncertainties and doubts there was also the hope of a better life, of a place that they could call their own. The belief that hard work and sacrifice would pay off was common during this time period and those making the move west were sure they were doing the right thing for their families. Faith kept these families going, and women especially relied on their faith to keep them strong when times got rough. During these hard times faith kept families strong and kept them working toward their goals of a better life. When things went smoothly these families were thankful for their blessings and sure that their hard work and sacrifice and continuing faith were the cause of their good fortune.

Women during the frontier times were the backbone of the family and they played a huge role when it came to survival on the frontier. There were many women who traveled to the frontier whose stories are not known because they were ordinary women. They were not married to wealthy men, they didn’t have a wealthy family and they didn’t
do anything extraordinary that would cause notice in books or newspapers. However, it was these ordinary women that helped build villages and towns, and whose very faith kept families going. Three ordinary women’s stories are told in this paper, Sarah Pratt, Lucy Hastings and Ann Eliza Bacon Porter. They were not extraordinary or especially wealthy and they struggled to make ends meet while at the same time overcoming great obstacles including loss of family members, illness, natural disasters and surviving the harsh elements of living on the frontier. By looking at their letters and journals we can look into their joys and struggles of living on the frontier, and we can celebrate what these brave women and thousands of other women like them did to settle the new land that became the state of Wisconsin.

Although these three women didn’t know each other and their lives were in many respects very different, when reading their letters and diaries we can get a sense of how they were similar. Of course, many of their day to day chores were shared but remarkably it was their faith and their dedication to making this new life work that was very similar. How these everyday women lived their daily lives in Wisconsin often escaped the history books, but it was women like Sarah, Lucy and Ann who helped shape the frontier of Wisconsin for generations to come.

**Historiography of Wisconsin Women**

There have been many works about the history of Wisconsin, and the pioneers that first settled the area. One of the most notable books on the Wisconsin frontier is Mark Wyman’s *The Wisconsin Frontier* which covers the history, both political and social, of Wisconsin extensively. While Wyman’s book is complete, information about
frontier women is scarce, taking up just a few pages. Much of what was written about the frontier in Wyman’s book was very general, but he does list the long list of chores and responsibilities that a women had on the frontier, as well as the other roles that she played in her house.

One of the most extensive works about Wisconsin is the seven volumes of The History of Wisconsin, which covers the history of Wisconsin from the French Explorers to more recent times. Again information relating to women specifically is limited, with a few mentions of more notable women, and a description of women’s work on farms in general. There are multiple other shorter books on the history of Wisconsin including the recent A Short History of Wisconsin by Erika Janik and the book Wisconsin: A History by Robert Nesbit. Both of these books follow the same format of Wyman’s book and the History of Wisconsin books, and cover much of the same information as well.

There are books specifically covering the topic of women in Wisconsin and these give us a better look into the lives of women in Wisconsin. The recent book Calling This Place Home by Joan Jenson looks at women in the Wisconsin Frontier from 1850-1925, and she tells the stories of many women in her book. However Jensen’s book focused more on women who settled in the later 1800s and early 1900s rather than women who settled in Wisconsin during the 1850s-1870s. Other books about women in Wisconsin include Women’s Wisconsin, More than Petticoats: Remarkable Wisconsin Women and The Story of Wisconsin Women. All of these books are excellent sources that give a detailed look of Wisconsin Women especially those that played a prominent role in Wisconsin’s history.
Short History of Wisconsin

The first European visitors to the state of Wisconsin were French explorers, fur traders and missionaries who arrived in the 1600s and 1700s. They arrived and lived among the large Native American population who had been in the area for many years already. Early relations among the Native Americans and French were fairly good, and the earliest explores and trappers depended on the Native Americans knowledge of survival and hunting. Native Americans soon became dependent on goods such as metal pots, tools and guns that the French had brought with them to the new land. Later relations between the French and the Native American became more troubled, and the Native Americans realized not all the goods they received from the French benefited them, especially the alcohol they quickly became reliant on. ¹

Wisconsin began to change slowly as several things began to happen. First the British began to take over the lands in Wisconsin, and pushed out the French. Second the Indians became reliant on European goods, and soon found themselves in debt to the fur traders for these goods. In addition disease began to spread rapidly between the Europeans and Native Americans who didn’t have a strong enough immunity to fight off the new diseases. Many Native Americans perished from these diseases, especially small pox. Lastly the Native Americans began to war against each other resulting in heavy casualties and movement of the tribes. ²

By 1800 the land in Wisconsin was under American control, first as part of Indiana Territory, then Illinois Territory and finally Michigan Territory, and it wasn’t long until the very first settlers started to arrive in the new territory. Some of the earliest

² Wyman, 82-83.
settlers in the early 1800s moved into the lead mining district hoping to make their fortunes. ³ Other early settlers were soldiers that occupied the earliest forts. One of the first European women who arrived in Wisconsin was the wife of one of these soldiers. Juliet Magill Kinzie lived at Fort Winnebago with her husband in 1830, just two years after the fort was built.⁴ Other settlers came for the good land that was talked about far and wide all over the East coast, with hopes of making their living by farming. Population in Wisconsin grew quickly and by 1836 Wisconsin had enough residents to form its own territory and begin its road to statehood.⁵

Before Wisconsin could achieve its goal of becoming a state it needed to open up as much land as it could to the settlers arriving on a daily basis. Wisconsin was largely populated by Native Americans so treaties needed to be made in order for that land to be settled. The government made treaties with the Winnebago to obtain their lands south of the Wisconsin and Fox Rivers in 1827, 1829 and 1832. The Winnebago were to receive a $10,000 annuity for their lands for twenty seven years and new land west of the Mississippi. After ceding the Winnebago land the government then focused on land in the southeast part of the state where the Menominee people lived. They completed a treaty with the Menominee in 1831. The next treaty was with the Potawatomi for land around Lake Michigan, who were also promised annuities, funds for farming supplies and land west of the Mississippi.⁶

After these land deals were made, and Wisconsin officially became a territory more and more land was taken from the Native Americans. In 1837 the tribes in

³ Wyman, 127.
⁴ Ibid., 129.
⁵ Ibid., 131.
⁶ Ibid., 160.
Wisconsin lost more lands than they ever had before, and the government started to make promises that they could not keep. Many times annuity payments arrived late or didn’t arrive at all; if they did arrive they often were not in the amounts originally promised. Sometimes supplies arrived in poor condition and many times the food that arrived was inedible. The Winnebago lost all of their remaining land in Wisconsin during 1837 after being promised they could stay on them for eight years; however they soon learned the government only intended for them to stay on the land for eight months. Lands were also ceded from the Sioux tribe and the Chippewa tribe in 1837.\(^7\) The last of the Native America lands were ceded from the Chippewa in 1842 and 1854 and then from the Menominee in 1848.\(^8\) The treaties made with the Native Americans opened the land up for more and more settlers, however the treaties were often not fair to the Native Americans, and Native Americans were forced to live on small reservations with meager supplies or to move West on land they were not familiar with.

Wisconsin’s journey from territory to statehood was a rather quick process, but not without some drama. The territory had enough residents by 1840 to become a state, more than double than the 40,000 that was required, however early settlers disagreed over what the state’s constitution should contain and the first four attempts at statehood failed.\(^9\) In 1846 another constitutional congress met and the new constitution they wrote was rejected in 1847 because of the controversial views that were included in this draft.\(^10\) Items that produced controversy included allowing immigrants to when they became citizens even if they didn’t own any land, property rights for married women, issues

about banking and paper money, and allowing a referendum vote on the ideas of African American suffrage. The next convention held in 1847 simply left out these controversial ideas. Another provision that had caused initial controversy was left in however, and Native American males who had been granted U.S. citizenship or who were not part of a registered tribe were given the right to vote in Wisconsin. This constitution was passed in March of 1848, and on May 29, 1848 Congress also approved the constitution and Wisconsin became the thirtieth state.

**Biographies of three Wisconsin Women –**

**Sarah Pratt**

Sarah Pratt and her sister Susannah traveled to Wisconsin in September of 1844 to visit their sister Jane and her husband, who had settled in Rock County in southern Wisconsin. Sarah, who had been born in New York on June 1, 1819, was just 25 years old when she made the journey to Wisconsin. Sarah’s journals and recollections of her time in Wisconsin are fairly complete, and at some points she wrote daily. Sarah quickly fell in love with Wisconsin despite the occasional battles with homesickness and found work as a Wisconsin school teacher. She often wrote fondly about her pupils along with her other daily activities. Sarah and her sister decided to make Wisconsin their permanent home, and Sarah bought her own homestead. Sarah’s parents and some of her other siblings joined her and her sisters in Wisconsin to help her farm and take care of the new land. Sarah’s journals give us a good look at what life might have been like during

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11 Janik, 35.
12 Wyman, 179.
these early years in Wisconsin, especially for a young, unmarried woman, and also show us the faith that she relied on during her life in Wisconsin.

**Lucy Ann Hastings**

Lucy Hastings was born Lucy Ann Merriam in 1819 in Massachusetts. She married David (or Smead as Lucy referred to him in her letters to family back East) in Greenfield, Massachusetts on October 8, 1846. Lucy and David first settled in Oxford Wisconsin, and then later Eau Claire, Wisconsin. Lucy and David traveled from Massachusetts in search of a new start, and the dream of being able to find fertile farm land. Lucy’s letters span a date range from 1855 to 1863, and there are often gaps of a few months or a year between letters. The letters are filled with day to day chores and activities, prices of food, gardening, events that happen around town, and the weather in Wisconsin. The most common topics include her health and the health of her husband, and they give us a look at what it must have been like to worry about a loved one in the frontier when money is tight and you cannot afford good medical care. Lucy’s letters also show us how important faith was to her and how it helped her make it through another day in rough times.

**Ann Eliza Bacon Porter**

Ann Eliza Bacon Porter was born September 3, 1821 to a fairly wealthy family in Bedford, Massachusetts. She married her husband Joseph on February 21, 1847 in their home town with their family in attendance. Joseph had gone ahead to Wisconsin to start his farm the previous June, and after the wedding he headed back to the farm which was

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13 Commonwealth of Massachusetts Certificate of Marriage, October 8, 1846.
located in southern Wisconsin in Rock County.\textsuperscript{14} About six months after the wedding Ann took her own journey to Wisconsin to meet her new husband and start her life on the farm. On September 13, 1848 a year after moving to Wisconsin Ann and Joseph’s first child, Helen was born. Three more children were born to Ann and Joseph, William on November 18, 1850, Amy born on June 29\textsuperscript{th}, 1853 and Joseph in March, 1857.\textsuperscript{15}

Ann’s papers included extensive journals, household accounts and expenses, recipes, and records about the types of crops and livestock they raised and sold. She often noted the weather, accomplishments of her children and music lessons that she taught other nearby families. Although there are long stretches where Ann writes on a daily basis there are stretches where she goes months or years between entries as well. Ann’s records help paint a picture of what people hoped to achieve when they moved to Wisconsin, and like Lucy and Sarah’s papers, show us how having faith in what she was doing helped her and her family to survive in the new land. However, Ann’s papers also show us how different your life could be if you had a little bit more income. Ann and her husband were better off than Lucy and Sarah, and Ann was able to afford medical care when it was needed, and she was able to take many trips back east to visit her family.

\textbf{The Journey to Wisconsin}

Everyone who decided to set off to a new place had to endure the trials, tribulations and grave danger that traveling possessed. Traveling to make a fresh start was undoubtedly exciting, but most likely travelers were also filled with anxiety and fear of not only the journey itself, but what would happen once they arrived at their


\textsuperscript{15} Lillian Porter, 89, 95.
destination. There were many different routes for travelers to get to Wisconsin. Travelers would first head from their starting point to Buffalo to commence their journey. Pioneers arrived in Buffalo, usually by train or wagon, and could choose between continuing on boat or train to Wisconsin. 16 Many settlers came on steam ships over the great lakes and through the Erie Canal; however this popular route was often very crowded and could sometimes be dangerous. Although most of these ships reached their destinations safely, some did sink and these were the stories that were told over and over in the east. Settlers considered these dangers the price they had to pay for the chance at a new life. 17 The journey between Buffalo and Milwaukee took on average between four and six days by boat, although could take longer. 18 Train travel during this time was also dangerous, and the stories of trains being derailed at high speeds also spread quickly. Settlers arriving from the south usually came on steam ships up the Mississippi River, and those coming from distant, more rural areas usually made the trip with a wagon and team of horses or oxen. 19

Sarah Pratt and her sister Susannah traveled by boat on the popular great lakes route. Sarah described the journey in her journals and reported that the biggest problem on the trip was a great number of people getting seasick on the journey. Their journey started in Oswego, and they traveled over the Great Lakes, through Canada and the Erie Canal, they passed Detroit and Mackinaw Island on their journey, finally crossing Lake

18 Current, 4.
19 Current, 64.
Michigan and landing in Milwaukee. Sarah left New York for Wisconsin on September 3, 1844 and arrived at her destination on September 20, 1944.\textsuperscript{20}

Ann Eliza Bacon Porter also traveled to Wisconsin by the popular route over the Great Lakes, and like Sarah she wrote about it in her journals in great detail. She started her trip to “this far away land of the west”\textsuperscript{21} by taking a train to Boston. She continued her journey on the train to Buffalo. Ann then traveled aboard the ship the \textit{St. Louis} across the lakes to her final destination in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Ann recalled in her journal that the \textit{St. Louis} was a “good substantial boat” and praised the rooms for being stable.\textsuperscript{22} Ann’s journey was not without some peril, a man fell overboard at one point, thankfully they were able to save him, and Ann and many others on board succumbed to the motion sickness caused from the waves. At one point Ann described the water on the lakes as “quite rough”.\textsuperscript{23}

Once reaching Milwaukee, Ann then traveled by coach to Janesville arriving on September 10, 1847, 11 days after leaving Boston. Ann described the coach ride as being one of the most dangerous parts of the journey, traveling on muddy roads that were practically impassable. The coach almost overturned when it became stuck in the mud, probably a common event during this time period. Once arriving in Cooksville Ann was met by her husband Joseph who escorted her to their new home.\textsuperscript{24}

Some travelers either didn’t care to travel by ship or couldn’t afford to and they arrived by wagon. Perhaps that is how Lucy Hastings and her husband traveled, although her letters do say exactly how she traveled. Lucy wrote that on her trip that their baggage

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[20]{Pratt, Sarah K. \textit{Sarah Pratt Diaries}. 1847. September 3, 4, 12, 19, 20, 1944.}
\footnotetext[21]{Porter, Ann Eliza Bacon. \textit{Ann Eliza Bacon Porter Papers}. 1890. September 18, 1847.}
\footnotetext[22]{Porter, September 18, 1847}
\footnotetext[23]{Ibid., September 5, 1847 and September 18, 1847.}
\footnotetext[24]{Ibid., September 9, 1847.}
\end{footnotes}
was in rough shape when they arrived in Wisconsin. She also mentioned that they crossed a large suspension bridge in Niagara, and in her first letter she described the prairies and farms in Illinois, suggesting that at least part of the trip was made by wagon and that they traveled through Canada.  

**Who came to Wisconsin? Why did they come here?**

Between 1830 and 1850 Wisconsin’s population rapidly increased as new lands opened up European and American settlers arrived from New England, New York and other Eastern states in increasing numbers, arriving by the thousands. Many settlers started to arrive from other countries as well, including Germany, England and Norway. These early settlers’ first occupied lands in southeastern Wisconsin, slowly expanding to the west and then the north as the years went on. The population in 1836 was 7,163 and it dramatically rose from there. By 1840 the population was 30,749 and just six years later it grew to 155,277. In another four years the population had doubled again growing to 304,756 in 1850. It was estimated that around 5000 farms a year were started in frontier Wisconsin during this time period.

Settlers came to Wisconsin for a variety of reasons, but they were all looking for a fresh start and a way to make their own living. Immigrants came to Wisconsin for especially for this reason, traveling not only across the country but across the ocean to pursue their dreams. By 1850 about a third of the Wisconsin settlers were foreign born.

Many immigrants from Norway, Belgium and Ireland that arrived in the states around

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25 Hastings, Lucy A. *Family Correspondence*. 1838. May 9, 1855.
26 Wyman, 157.
27 Ibid., 159.
28 Current, 61.
29 Janik, 38.
1840 had been forced out of their native homes due to famine, due to their potato crops rotting in the ground. Many others who came were not in as dire straits as the potato farmers. However they were not wealthy either and the plots of land available in Europe were not big enough to support multiple sons and their families. Younger sons in Europe could not inherit the family land, and there was very little new land available to purchase so they were left to move across the ocean if they wanted to farm. Many others from Norway, Germany and Belgium arrived in Wisconsin to avoid military service, or to avoid religious persecution as well as for economic reasons and lack of jobs in their homelands. Wisconsin soon had a large population of Germans, Irish, and Norwegians, as well as many settlers from other countries.

Settlers, especially immigrants, did not find their way to Wisconsin by accident. Land brokers who had bought up large amounts of land in Wisconsin benefited from new settlers and they were sure to put the information about the new territory out to the public. The guide book *Northern Wisconsin: A Hand Book for the Homeseeker* described Wisconsin in a way that would be hard for settlers to resist coming to see Wisconsin for themselves, saying

> Wisconsin is most favorable situated not only for agriculture, but also for manufacturing and commerce. Nearly all her territory lies in the Mississippi Valley, which is the garden spot of the world.

Others headed to Wisconsin on the recommendation of relatives who had already arrived in the state and set up their homesteads. One homesteader from Connecticut described Wisconsin this way to relatives back home:

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30 Current, 61.
31 Current, 61.
32 Janik, 42.
33 Janik, 37.
The natural resources of Wisconsin are almost unlimited and nothing is wanted but the hand of cultivation to make it the garden of the world. There is a softness and beauty in the landscape which is indescribable and which the hand of art will fail to improve.  

Sarah Pratt’s first reaction to the state of Wisconsin was one of disappointment. She had “imagined we were going in a wilderness but in that I am disappointed…it was settled all along the roadside and every mile or two there was a sort of tavern.”

Despite this initial disappointment Sarah quickly saw the beauty in Wisconsin and she described a beautiful countryside, orchards and trees that most people came to the state to find, and later wrote home to brag about. She was amazed at how friendly the people she encountered were and how much Wisconsin reminded her of home. She said:

We passed through some beautiful country. I could hardly believe I was in a new country. The farms truly look like old farms that have been settled a great while excepting the buildings. They all look new and with the exceptions of fruit too. And to view the prospect of the farms at a distance you truly would think you were surrounded with large orchards.

Sarah Pratt and her sister had intended to only visit their sister in Wisconsin for the winter, but they decided to stay on for the next summer as well. During that first summer in Wisconsin they started to think about making Wisconsin their permanent home. By July of 1845 Sarah began to put aside the money she was making teaching school towards buying some land near her sister and brother in laws homestead. She wrote in her journal on July 16 that “I talk about getting a piece of land 40 acres, to make a home for us.” The land would cost her $100, an amount that she would gladly pay to be nearer to family. The next day she confirmed the decision writing that she and Susannah have decided that they will buy the land. By July 19 she has the deed in hand,

34 Janik, 37.
35 Pratt., September 19, 1844.
36 Ibid., September 19, 1844.
37 Ibid., July 16, 1845.
and she is hoping that some of her family members back east will come to join her and her sisters in Wisconsin. Her wish comes true when Sarah received word on July 26 that her mother, father, brother and other two sisters are moving to Wisconsin.38

Lucy Hastings settled in Oxford, Wisconsin in 1855 and then moved north to Eau Claire, Wisconsin two years later. Lucy described the west in one of her first letters home to her family:

The west is a fine country. The broad prairies look beautiful, almost beyond description. How I wish you could see the nice farms, in many places.39

Lucy and her husband sold their land in Oxford about two years after they arrived there, because Smead had been ill for a period of time. They needed the money to pay off some debts they occurred during his illness. After they paid the debt they had enough money to move north to Eau Claire and buy a lot by the Chippewa River as well as some land to farm. After they bought the land they settled in the village of Eau Claire where Smead worked as a carpenter in order to raise enough money to build on their farmland. Lucy had very good things to say about their new home in Eau Claire, saying “Truly the western country is beautiful.”40

Ann, like many women of her time was a little reluctant about leaving her comfortable social life, home and family to head into the wilderness. She worried that she would never see her family and her friends again, and she knew that she would be homesick so far away from them. She was worried about what challenges her new home would bring, and what it would be like to live in the west. However, like many women who had been in her shoes she decided to “submit myself with Christian resignation”

38 Pratt, July 17, 19, 26, 1845.
39 Hastings, May 9’ 1855.
40 Ibid., June 22, 1857.
Despite the fact that she was “going far away from all I had once held dearest in the world.”\(^{41}\) Despite this reluctance she was excited to be reunited with her beloved new husband.\(^{42}\)

**Making a Living in Wisconsin**

When pioneers arrived at their new homesteads they had to start from scratch in building their new lives. The first thing settlers had to do was build their shelter so they would be protected from the elements and the cold hard winter that would be upon them soon. Depending on where in Wisconsin they had settled in this meant clearing trees or stumps or breaking prairie land. These first shelters were rough structures that were like huts or shanties. The walls, roofs and floors usually had large cracks and were not always safe from the elements.\(^{43}\) There were accounts of settler’s first dwellings that described snow coming in and covering the beds overnight. These first cabins were small, commonly only 12 by 12 feet. The floor in the main room was made of split logs and there was often a second room in the attic that could be accessed by the ladder.\(^{44}\) There were settlers who were unprepared for their first winter in Wisconsin, and some didn’t make it through.

Sarah encountered some difficulty when she tried to move into her new house, which was located in the town of Union, on September 1, 1845. Upon arriving at her new house with all of her belongings she found out that the previous family was still living there and she was very surprised. Sarah felt that by allowing the family to stay

\(^{41}\) Porter, August 31, 1847.  
\(^{42}\) Ibid., August 31, 1847.  
\(^{43}\) Thompson, 480.  
until they could other arrangements would be the charitable thing to do. Sarah and Susannah lived with the family of four for almost a whole month in a house that was too small to sleep six people. It wasn’t until September 22 that the other family had finally been able to move and the house was all Sarah’s. She quickly went to work trying to clean up the cabin as much as she could for her family’s imminent arrival. She wrote that she spent the next few days cleaning, baking, and ironing clothes to get the cabin ready for her family. Her efforts paid off just in time; her family arrived on September 27, 1845.45

Despite the joy Sarah felt at owning her own homestead and house, the house itself was not in good shape and was not very comfortable, and as the weather turned colder it was clear that the house would not be well protected against the winter weather. Also, water was a great distance away making it difficult to keep a supply of water near the house. Sarah felt anxious during this time, worried that her family won’t like living in Wisconsin and worried that they will have come all the way there just to turn around and leave again. Her fears quickly are realized with her sister Amanda decides she wants to return home on October 12, 1945. Although work started on a better house in December, this first winter the family had to make due in the overcrowded house that did not keep the cold out.46

Picking the right piece of land to build the house on was important. Ann and Joseph Porter’s homestead was in the southern part of the state near the town of Cooksville. Joseph found the type of land that many of the homesteading guides encouraged homesteaders to look for when choosing their new homes. Their land

45 Pratt, September 21, 23, 24, 27, 1845.
46 Pratt, October 12, December 1845.
contained a stream which was good for a saw mill on the property, and they made a profit by selling their timber to other nearby settlers. They were lucky to have good soil in this part of the state that was good for raising crops, and Joseph’s land also had a fresh water spring, giving the family a ready water supply.47 Those who didn’t find this source of fresh water had to dig a well, often needing to dig more than 100 feet to find the water.48 It was important to have a water source near the house as Sarah Pratt found out, having to haul water a long distance was hard work and water was needed on a daily basis.

Settlers that came to Wisconsin with hopes of farming had a large task ahead of them. As mentioned earlier many settlers arrived in Wisconsin with just this intention, starting new farms at the rate of 5,000 farms per year. Before these settlers could even think about planting they had to deal with chopping down trees, removing stumps and clearing out brush. Settlers were lucky if they could clear enough their first year to build a cabin, plant a garden and then start to clear enough land to plant some crops. Settlers who chose prairie land to live on could clear more land in a day, but they had to deal with the roots that were under the soil.49

Wheat was the preferred crop of many of the first farmers in Wisconsin, as wheat had the potential to make a lot of money. Although the soil was well suited for good early wheat crops, wheat wasn’t the best crop for Wisconsin in the long run. Wheat didn’t grow as well as many people had predicted and it robbed the soil of important nutrients including nitrogen which was essential for wheat. Many wheat farmers moved further west to Minnesota and Iowa after only a few years which led to competition with those who had remained in Wisconsin. Also the price of wheat began to drop by the end

47 Lillian Porter, 68.
48 Current, 88.
49 Ibid., 86-87.
of the 1850s and disease and bugs began to strike the crops of wheat in Wisconsin. It wasn’t long before farmers turned to other crops like corn which did very well in Wisconsin.\(^{50}\)

Livestock was important to farmers in the new world. Some families only had enough livestock to survive from day to day, if they had any at all. Even just having a few chickens or a cow gave these subsistence farmers an advantage in the food situation, because having access to fresh milk, eggs and meat rounded out the plain diet of potatoes, grains and vegetables that most families relied on. Other families were lucky enough to use their livestock to bring in some extra money. While most women used the milk their cows produced to make butter for their own family some were able to sell or trade the butter.\(^{51}\) Ann Porter sold her butter in 1869 and recorded that she made $70.85 for her hard work, and she also had several notations for selling eggs.\(^{52}\) Later Wisconsin families were able to use their cows and milk to create their own dairies that also produced cheese products. Wisconsin quickly became known as the dairy state in the late 1800s.\(^{53}\)

There were many other animals that settlers could use to bring in money or add to the families coffers. For example, Ann Porter sold wool in the nearby city of Janesville for 35 cents a pound.\(^{54}\) The Porter’s also raised turkeys on their farm, which brought in a nice income. The turkeys sold for around $1.25 each, and they sold several each month. In January of 1870 they sent 47 turkeys to Boston and received $66.83 for them.\(^{55}\)

\(^{50}\) Janik, 75-76.
\(^{51}\) Ibid., 75-76.
\(^{52}\) Porter, October 1869.
\(^{53}\) Janik, 76.
\(^{54}\) Porter, June 20, 1860.
\(^{55}\) Ibid., January, 1870.
Lucy Hastings and her husband were a perfect example of subsistence farmers who grew what they needed to survive, but didn’t have enough to sell to make extra income. They had some livestock that they were able to relay on in addition to the corn and the wheat they were able to grow over the summer. Lucy wrote that she was thankful that they would have plenty of food to eat despite being short on money. Lucy wrote in January of 1860 that they had pig that would be able to provide meat in the spring and they were hoping to soon have a cow that will provide milk and butter. They were raising chickens and canaries as well. Lucy loved her little birds, and she sold them to others to help pay for food for her and David. She sold one bird for a dollar’s worth of butter and two bushels of wheat.\(^{56}\)

Almost everyone settling in the frontier had a garden, even if they lived in town. As with livestock settlers relied on their gardens to feed their families throughout the winter. The more food a family could grow themselves, the less they would need to buy and the more comfortable they would be through the winter. The garden was usually the responsibility of the women of the household, whose job it was to make sure her family had enough food for the year ahead. Men would help clear the land for the garden, and children would help with the weeding and the hoeing. If a family was lucky the household garden could provide a bit of extra income in addition to providing a family with food for the next winter. Summer was a busy time of year for women who spent most of their daylight hours harvesting their gardens and putting up the food in storage for the long, cold winter ahead.\(^{57}\)

\(^{56}\) Hastings, January 1, 1860.

Sarah Pratt planted a garden containing watermelon, muskmelons, corn, beans, onions and potatoes. These were staples in many gardens all over the state of Wisconsin. The first full year Lucy Hastings and her husband live in Oxford, Wisconsin she mentioned planting potatoes, corn, and wheat on their 80 acres of land. They also planted a garden at their house in town. Ann Porter and her family had a large garden that seemed to grow every year. Ann’s garden contained cabbage which she often shared with neighbors and tomatoes that she had taken the time to start indoors. Some of the other items planted on the Porter farm included onions, melons, squash, sweet marjoram, nutmeg, and radishes.

Another common way to get food was to forage for it. Berries were abundant in Wisconsin during the summer months and women devoted a great amount of time picking, drying and canning strawberries, currants, cranberries, raspberries, blackberries, cherries, blueberries and gooseberries. Women often spent days or weeks picking berries while they were available. Even during a visit to family in the east Ann Porter picked berries with family members, drying them carefully to bring some back to Wisconsin to her family. Another way to supplement available food was to hunt and fish. Lucy Hastings remarked in a letter home that there was plenty of wild game at their new home in Oxford including deer and wild birds as well as fish. Upon moving to the village of Eau Claire Smead was still able to fish on the river near their house. Other families in

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58 Pratt, July 29, 1845.
59 Hastings, April 27, 1846.
60 Porter, June 4, 1864.
62 Porter, July 28, 1867.
63 Hastings, May 9, 1855.
64 Ibid., October 25, 1857.
Wisconsin gathered ginseng, wild rice and maple syrup from the land, all which might have produced a cash income.\(^{65}\)

When settlers arrived in Wisconsin they underestimated the prices of items they would need to survive. Land was usually priced higher than had been published in land books back east because it had been bought by investors and now was being resold at a profit. Sometimes farmers had to find other like David Hastings or simply use up most of their savings for the land. Supplies also cost more than settlers had planned on. Lucy Hastings talked about the high prices in Wisconsin in her letters home. While living in Oxford she often remarked that she missed eating apples, something they couldn’t afford in Wisconsin because the price was so high. In a letter dated May 9, 1855 she listed wheat as costing one dollar a bushel, potatoes at 28 cents a bushel, and eggs at 6 ¼ cents per dozen.\(^{66}\) About two years later, having made the move to Eau Claire, she again mentions the high cost of food. Wheat was double the price it had been in Oxford at two dollars a bushel and the price of potatoes had gone up all the way to fifty cents a bushel. She mentioned the prices of butter, port, sugar and lard as well in this letter.\(^{67}\)

Prices in the southern part of the states were similar in 1860, Ann Porter’s expense books listed sugar as 50 cents for four pounds and one dozen eggs for 7 cents. However the Porters seemed to be able to absorb the costs better than Lucy Hastings could, because on the same day she purchased luxuries that Lucy Hastings never mentioned in her letters including two pigs for four dollars and a pudding dish for twenty-five cents. In other entries that same year she purchased a hat for 25 cents, velvet

\(^{65}\) Jensen, 103.
\(^{66}\) Hastings, May 9, 1855.
\(^{67}\) Ibid., June 22, 1857.
ribbons for $1.50 and a muff and collar for $7.00. She was also willing to pay the high price of $1.05 for the dried apples.\(^68\)

Typical daily chores for pioneer women were numerous and included running the overall household, cooking, cleaning, having and raising children, helping with farm chores; these included feeding chickens, collecting chicken eggs, milking cows and churning butter.\(^69\) Sewing and mending also took up a large amount of time, especially families with a large number of children. Many families could not afford readymade clothing, even if it was available where they lived. Ann Porter sewed often, in one journal entry she talked about sewing late into the night after she had gotten supper, sang with the children and rocked her baby boy to sleep. Ann mentioned finishing various sewing projects in her journals, and she seemed receive satisfaction upon completing an outfit for one of her children.\(^70\) Sarah Pratt also sewed a great deal, and she used sewing as a way to bring in extra income as well as helping her sisters with their sewing while they did other chores.\(^71\)

Cooking wasn’t something that was mentioned in women’s journals and letters, despite the fact that they must have cooked three meals daily. Ann Porter’s journals do contain recipes that she would have in her home but there is not much mention of the process of cooking itself.\(^72\) In one entry in 1860 Ann mentioned she made a soup for lunch, and that her daughter Kate has been baking pies. In the same entry she mentioned

\(^{68}\) Porter, April 1, 1860 and June 26 1861.  
\(^{69}\) Thompson, 493  
\(^{70}\) Porter, February 22, 1860.  
\(^{71}\) Pratt, March 22, 1845.  
\(^{72}\) Recipes in Anne’s journals included White Cake, Cream Pie, Pudding, Whipped Cream Cake, Aunt Abby’s Berry Cream Cake, Washington Cake, Brooks Cake, One Egg Cake, Tomato Pickles, House Pickles, Fruit Cake, Parker House Rolls, Mince Pies, Butter Pudding, Lemon Pie, Ice Cream, Lemon Pudding, Scalloped Oysters and Bird’s Nest Pudding. She also made a notation in her recipes that the Washington Cake would keep for one full year, and longer if no one eats it.
picking currants and gooseberries the last few days, perhaps these were the sorts of pies they baked. It is certain that women had to be creative when it came to putting food on the table for their families in the wilderness. One example of this creativity would be a family who didn’t have a way to make wheat flour using corn instead. Using a small hand grinder would be one way they could grind the corn up for their daily baking.

Settlers that couldn’t afford to farm right away often took work wherever they could find it, and then saved up until they could afford to farm. When Lucy Hastings and her husband David arrived in Oxford they bought farm land, but couldn’t afford to build on the farm right away. David found work as a carpenter in Oxford and worked throughout the fall and winter trying to earn enough to farm the next summer. Although Lucy and David do not build on the farm while in Oxford they do earn enough through his work to plant a few crops and buy a cow and some chickens. Two years later when Lucy and David moved north to Eau Claire, they repeat the same pattern of buying a house in the village and then farmland they hopefully can build on at a later date. Those who had a trade like David could make good money during certain times, and if they couldn’t afford to farm as they originally intended this kind of work kept them going. In June of 1857 Lucy wrote that David was earning $2.25 a day as a carpenter. A few months later in October she wrote that he was helping to build the Presbyterian Church for the same amount per day.

School teachers were needed in the frontier, as many families especially those that were from the east wanted to be sure that their families received an education even in the

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73 Porter, May 30, 1860.
74 Wyman, 180.
75 Hastings, May 9, 1855.
76 Ibid., April 27, 1856.
77 Hastings, June 22, 1857 and October 25, 1857.
wilderness. Some of the earlier attempts at creating schools were a hard sell, because in order to fund the schools taxation was necessary. The Wisconsin constitution mirrored the belief of these settlers that a free education was something the state should provide for all children ages 4-20. Wisconsin was one of the first states to place such an emphasis on education.\textsuperscript{78} School attendance was spotty because many children were needed at home to help with chores and other household tasks, but in general girls attended more often than the boys, and younger girls below the age of ten most often. Younger boys were in school more than older boys, but still less than the girls.\textsuperscript{79}

Early teachers in Wisconsin did not teach full time, they taught short sessions throughout the school year. Both women and men taught school in Wisconsin, although women made about half as much money as the men did for the same job. The average salary for a school teacher could be anywhere between ten dollars a month to thirty five dollars a month. Many teachers in Wisconsin taught for 18 months or less. Early school houses were often small log cabins, which were often cold and not well equipped for teaching school. These small cabins were just one room most of the time and the teacher had to figure out how to manage a large group at a variety of levels. Wisconsin law mandated that certain subjects must be taught at every school, including reading, writing, grammar, geography, and arithmetic. Other subjects could be decided by the local school board.\textsuperscript{80}

Upon arriving in Wisconsin Sarah Pratt was hired to teach school in the local school. Sarah had taught school back in New York and was an experienced school teacher. Once she started to teach school it turned out that she knew some of the families

\textsuperscript{78} Janik, 56.  
\textsuperscript{79} Jensen, 260.  
\textsuperscript{80} Current, 163-164.
that were sending their children to her school, and she was thrilled to be teaching these children from families she already knew. Although this school in Wisconsin was smaller than her school back east she was excited about the seven or eight children she would be teaching. She described her students as “industrious and anxious to learn.”\textsuperscript{81} Her school size increased the next summer from 8 children to 19, as more settlers moved to the area.\textsuperscript{82}

Ann Porter felt strongly about education for her children as well, often mentioning doing lessons with her children and sending them to the nearby school. Her children also attended a writing school or spelling school, in the evening. Ann thought that children should learn more than the standard reading and writing and gave her children music lessons as well as language lessons. As she got older and her children required less of her care, she gave other children in the area lessons in music, French and German, which had the added benefit of bringing in some extra income. In 1866 the two oldest Porter children were sent to “the academy” to get some more advanced schooling. They came home occasionally for visits, and Ann and Joseph also visited from time to time. Nellie went on for further schooling in the seminary and both Willie and Amy became school teachers near the Porter farm. Willie made $40 a month in November of 1873 and Amy was making $35 a month.\textsuperscript{83}

Another way some people helped to supplement their income was to take in boarders, people who didn’t have their own homes and needed a place to stay while they worked and saved up money. Boarders usually consisted of a married couple or a single man. Lucy Hastings took in boarders in the summer of 1857 and 1858. Having boarders

\textsuperscript{81} Pratt, October and November 1844.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., July 8, 1845.
\textsuperscript{83} Porter, February 22, 1860, April 1865, March 31, 1866 and November 17, 1873.
was exhausting work, not only did Lucy need to tend to her own chores; she needed to
tend to her boarders chores and meals. She wrote that they earned $4.50 from the
boarders, but she had to do the work all on her own.84 Women all over the expanding
state had to play unofficial innkeeper at times, especially if they were one of the first
settlers to come to an area. Women went out of their way to help out new neighbors, and
new neighbors were usually considered a blessing instead of more work because it meant
that there was someone nearby to talk to and to help out if help was needed.85 When
other settlers were traveling through the area and needed a place to stay many frontier
women opened their homes up to strangers. Many times they did this at their own
expense, giving up their often limited supply of food and their own beds.86

Social Life in Wisconsin

Life on the frontier was really hard, and there was very little time for rest and
relaxation on the frontier. If you lived any distance from town any social time you would
have was very limited. Therefore any social encounters that were available became very
important to women in the frontier, and any visits women were able to make helped
elevate the homesickness many women felt on the frontier. Women took any chance they
could to attend a social event, and if there were none to be had elsewhere they often
created them in their own homes or churches. As people became more and more settled
and as they became able to afford to have any kind of help, social events increased on the
frontier.

84 Hastings, October 25, 1857 and August 22, 1858.
85 Krueger, 160.
86 Ibid., 162.
Ann Eliza Bacon Porter was quite used to going to social events; concerts and meetings at home in Massachusetts. Her earliest journal entries were filled with social events that she attended with friends, family, and even her soon to be husband Joseph, like the time he took her to a museum early on in their courtship. When she moved to Wisconsin these opportunities are not available, but she was fortunate enough that she could afford to travel to nearby towns to events on occasion. In one of her journal entries in 1860 she mentioned that she and Joseph were able to sneak away to Janesville to see a musical, and she also talked about going to the village to visit friends. They were also able to visit other nearby towns, including Madison when the family traveled to attend the Wisconsin State Fair.

Ann and her family often attended events such as debates or singing events at the schoolhouse. The schoolhouse seemed to be the venue of many entertainments for the Porter family and their neighbors, and this was likely the case all over the frontier. Ann’s journal also mentioned attending a women’s rights discussion in 1860. Reinforcing the idea that being social anyway possible in important to women on the pioneer was when Ann talked about learning how to play Euchre. She laments on the fact that she does not really enjoy card games, but by learning how to play she could attend parties to play with other people. As she and Joseph became more settled and had more income she started to host parties in her own home. In March of 1860 she hosted a house party on one day, and on the next a children’s party. She spared no expense on activities and food for her

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87 Porter, May 21, 1845.
88 Porter, June 2, 1860 and September, 1860.
89 Ibid., March 5, 1860.
guests. Lucy Hastings and Sarah Hastings do mention visits from time to time, but many of their social events revolve around attending “meetings” or attending church.

Weather and Natural Disasters

Weather was always on the mind of everyone on the frontier. Farmers worried about the weather constantly, and even those that didn’t farm wrote about the weather in their letters or journals which almost always mentioned the weather in some way. Events such as an ice storm, blizzard or thunderstorm were most often mentioned, but also nice weather and the daily temperatures were also included in journals and letters. Weather was such an important topic because farmers relied on good weather for their livelihood, and a hailstorm or a drought could cause a farmer’s entire crop to fail.

Sarah Pratt mentioned the perils of Wisconsin weather on May 5, 1845 when there was a hard frost. An early or late frost like this one could kill an entire crop and was always a possibility in a location like Wisconsin. Also dangerous to farmers was the lack of rain. Ann Porter remarked on the lack of rain they were experiencing in the summer of 1848 saying, “still no rain and everything is parching and withering away from the want of it.” There was nothing settlers could do about the lack of rain, except pray it would rain in time to save their crops. In Ann’s journal the weather was tracked for an entire year showing us how important the topic of weather was. Entries included the daily temperature, any type of rain or snow and the wind. The entries included

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90 Porter., March 1, March 8 and March 9, 1860.
91 Pratt, May 4, 1845.
92 Porter, December 27, 1847 – May 22nd 1848.
detailed, almost poetic, descriptions of the weather. An entry on January 11, 1848 remarked that the wind was blowing mightily and “the night made me feel thankful for a warm shelter and pity for those who had none”.

Another danger in Wisconsin, especially when there was a dry season, was the threat of fire. Wildfires and forest fires in Wisconsin spread fast, and did a lot of damage. Wisconsin was home to many lumber towns which were especially vulnerable to fires including Eau Claire where Lucy Hastings lived and Peshtigo where the largest Wisconsin forest fire took place. In Joan Jensen’s book *Calling This Place Home*, she described Emina Johnson’s experience of the Peshtigo Fire. Emina and her family were from Sweden and their home was near the Peshtigo River in the logging village Peshtigo. The fire occurred in October 8, 1871, a very dry year for Wisconsin, in the Peshtigo area there had been no rain since July 8.

Fires that fall were a common occurrence and everyone had been on edge. Emina had gone to church that evening with her beau, and when they headed home that night they could see red spots in the distance indicating fire. Although the villagers tried to fight this fire it was soon deemed impossible and everyone ran for the river. Emina and her beau watched the fire from a bluff, and witnessed people trying to escape the fires. Then they too had to hide in the river bank to survive the fire with many others from the village. She described the fire as “red spots on the horizon” that “quickly lengthened into tongues of flame borne on what seemed to be a tornado. Great balls of fire shot

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93 The weather logs are in Ann’s journal among her other journal entries, however another family member wrote in her memoirs that it was Joseph who was the novice meteorologist and he had kept track of the weather all those months. This claim can be somewhat supported by the entry on January 13, 1848 that proclaimed “Eliza made her first loaf of milk yeast bread.” Despite who kept the record, it reinforces how important the weather was to settlers during this time period.
94 Porter, January 11, 1848.
95 Jensen, 39.
96 Current, 475.
through the air, followed by huge burning logs.”\textsuperscript{97} The Peshtigo Fire, which was really several large fires in the same area, killed as many as 1200 people and many more were injured. As many as 5,000 people lost their homes and all of their possessions and it was recorded as Wisconsin’s largest forest fire.\textsuperscript{98}

Eau Claire too was plagued by fires over the years. Eau Claire itself was not a city until 1872, before that it had been three separate villages known as West Eau Claire, East Eau Claire and North Eau Claire. East Eau Claire suffered the most from the fires during this time period and West Eau Claire had the most progressive fire department. Some neighborhoods in Eau Claire suffered losses due to fire several times in a matter of a few years, and the downtown area of Eau Claire as well as the lumber mills suffered from many fires. Sometimes a block or as many as three blocks were destroyed by these fires. Calls to start a fire department in Eau Claire were high because fire was such a problem in the city. It wasn’t until the 1870s before the villages banded together to provide more fire protection.\textsuperscript{99}

**Illness and Tragedy**

Lucy Hastings and her husband didn’t always have an easy go of it in their new home. She wrote in May of 1859 that there wasn’t much work to be found and no money to be had in the village of Eau Claire. She admitted to her family that they were having hard times, as was everyone in the area. She was grateful for what they did have saying “we have enough to eat, drink and wear” but admitting that “we do not have the dainties

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{97} Jensen, 41.
\textsuperscript{98} Current, 474-476.
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you eastern people have.”100 In letters dated January 1, 1860 and February 26, 1860 Lucy
again mentioned these hard times and the lack of money and work to be had. In the same
letter she talks about two recent bank robberies in Eau Claire, probably by people who
were also suffering from a lack of work and money during this time period.101

Lucy and Smead, and many others in Eau Claire and Wisconsin, were most likely
suffering from the Panic of 1857 which caused a lot of banks to stop paying out in
banknotes. In the depression that followed the panic there was a severe lack of both
paper money and coin in which to pay people, and property values dropped as well.
Those in Wisconsin felt the sting of this depression greatly and it lasted longer in
Wisconsin than it did a lot of other places. It wasn’t until around 1860 that Wisconsin
finally started to recover from this crisis. The economy rebounded some in the early
1860’s but by 1867 another downturn occurred that lasted about four years. There was a
short period of recovery in 1871 but it quickly faded in the panic of 1873 which brought
on the worst depression the country had seen so far. Again the money supply in
Wisconsin and the United States dried up.102 This kind of crisis was hard on farmers who
relied on their crops to bring in money. If there were was no money to be had the prices
they could get for their hard work dropped, leaving the family worse off than they had
been before they spent the money on producing a crop. It was during this time period
that Wisconsin farmers had to experiment with crops other than wheat in order to produce
an income.

Childbirth in Wisconsin was one of the leading causes of death for a woman of
childbearing age. There were a variety of complications listed on death certificates that

100 Hastings, May 3, 1859.
101 Ibid., January 1, 1860 and February.
102 Current, 237, 452-453.
included miscarriage, childbed fever, hemorrhage in confinement and odious labor. Another leading cause of death for women who had given birth was infection, because the practices of sanitation and sterilization had not yet become common. However, if a woman in Wisconsin was lucky enough to have a skilled midwife nearby childbirth was much safer. Midwives reported both mother’s deaths and infant’s death’s much less often than did women who birthed with family member help or even those who had a doctor in attendance. It was believed that these midwives had started to realize clean hands and medical instruments were essential to less infection during childbirth.103

Ann Eliza Bacon Porter gave birth to four healthy children according to her journals. Ann was fortunate to have four surviving births from four pregnancies, and that she lived through each birth. Also, each of her four children made it through their childhood and into adulthood was fortunate.104 This was significant because infancy was the second most dangerous age behind women of childbearing age. According the death records in the later 1800’s contagious disease and accidents were the leading cause of death for young children. Most deaths in children happened before the age of one, and the next most dangerous time for children was between the ages of one and five. For infants most death records recorded the cause of death simply as “not well from birth” or stillbirth.105

When reading Ann’s journals a picture of a devoted wife and mother was portrayed through her words. It’s clear that she was thankful on many occasions that her children were healthy and happy. On February 28, 1860 Ann reflected about her

103 Jensen, 162.
104 It is unknown if Anne had any unsuccessful pregnancies that ended in miscarriage. There was no mention of this in any journal, and it would have been highly unusual for any women of this time period to make mention of a miscarriage in her journals.
105 Jensen, 152.
children, talking about their traits. Her youngest son Josie, who was around three years at this point in time, she described as amusing and often entertained her with his funny stories and sayings. She remarked that he was growing up, a common sentiment of mothers about their youngest children. Her oldest child Helen, whom she calls Nellie in this entry, she described as impetuous and remarked that she wished she would soon outgrow that. Helen was twelve at this time. William, who was ten years old she called a good boy although she mentioned that he has “some wayward tendencies to overcome.” She finished the entry by saying that she loves her “darling, precious children all!” She hoped that she could provide her children with guidance that would be helpful for them and not be a “stumbling block”.

Living on the frontier was not only hard mentally and physically, it took a toll on women’s health and their looks as well. Upon arrival at her sister Jane’s house Sarah Pratt was very surprised by her sister’s appearance. The harsh environment had aged Jane greatly and her appearance was so different that Sarah could barely look at her, “I looked at her but she was so altered I turned my eyes away.” She described Jane’s eyes as being sunken and noticed that she had lost many teeth. Despite being able to afford better medical care Ann Porter suffers from the effects of aging in the harsh environment of Wisconsin as well. On a trip back east she had to have her front teeth extracted by a dentist. She felt self-conscious about her missing teeth and a few days

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106 Porter, February 28, 1860.
107 Porter, February 28, 1860.
108 Ibid., February 28, 1860.
109 Pratt, September 20, 1844.
110 Ibid., September 20, 1844.
111 Porter, June 1, 1867.
later remarked in her journal that her looks have changed so much and so many of her old
friends and relatives that she was visiting her in Massachusetts had not changed at all. 112

Many women on the frontier had to be the doctors of the house for their own
families and many had recipes for medicines to cure common illnesses because they were
not fortunate enough to have a doctor nearby. Ann Porter recorded some of her
commonly used remedies in her journals. She had a homemade recipe recorded for both
diphtheria and rheumatism, and her cure for the common cold included using cayenne
pepper in tea.113

Illness was a real concern on the frontier and almost everyone succumbed to at
least minor illnesses at some point. Many people could not afford to see a doctor and
even if they could afford one, sometimes sending for them did not do very much good
because they did not really understand how to treat some of the diseases, or they were too
far away to do much good for a patient.114 Some of the most common illnesses on the
frontier included headaches, cholera, malaria, measles, mumps, whooping cough and
fever and ague. Other diseases that were often deadly included consumption
(tuberculosis), lung fever, small pox and diphtheria.115

Sarah Pratt had her fair share of illness after arriving in Wisconsin, starting with
the day after Christmas during her first Wisconsin when she came down with a serious
illness. She wrote that she awoke with a “slight dizziness in my head”116 and from there
her symptoms seemed to get worse. She had sudden, severe cramping and she collapsed
lifeless with her eyes rolling up into her head. Other symptoms included having pain in

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112 Porter., June 2, 1867.
113 Ibid., 1870.
114 Thompson, 482.
115 Ibid., 484
116 Pratt, December 26, 1844.
her neck and head and light sensitivity in her eyes, as well as facial bloating. The people she was boarding with bathed her in warm vinegar and cayenne pepper and cared for her. On January 24, 1845 she described the illness in her journal, saying this was the first time since she got sick that she was able to sit up long enough to do so. During her description of the illness she said that it was at least ten days before she was able to sit up at all, and even a month later she tired easily.\textsuperscript{117}

In August of 1846 Sarah became ill again. She had a cough and a fever, and it seemed as if the entire family is suffering from this illness. Between August and September much of the family was sick on and off, but by the end of September everyone seemed to be healing except for Sarah. She recorded in October 1846 that she still wasn’t well, and a month later on November 27, she complained of an irritation of her lungs, sore stomach and difficulty breathing.\textsuperscript{118} After this round of illness Sarah’s journal entries have longer and longer gaps in between them. On January 4, 1847 Sarah wrote with great distress that she is in very poor health, and was feeling very short of breath.\textsuperscript{119}

Sarah’s health continued to decline in March and April of 1847, and her journal continued to have big gaps in them. She had only one entry for January, one in February, two in March and one each in April and May. Each entry seems more desperate than the last, and some entries revealed that other family members are also ill, including her mother, father and her sister Sementhe. On April 17, Sarah wrote that she was too weak to even write in her journal very often, but her May 9 entry portrayed a little bit of hope.

\textsuperscript{117} Pratt, January 24, 1845.
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., August 16, 1846, November 27, 1846.
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., January 4, 1847.
about her health saying that she is feeling a little bit better and is able to sit up and write in her journal.\textsuperscript{120}

Sarah had two journal entries in July of 1847, the first one on July 1 once again complained of fever, chills and vomiting. The later entry on July 24 offered hope again as Sarah reported she was feeling better once more, and she was again hopeful she would recover.\textsuperscript{121} However when Sarah writes almost two months later in her final entry dated September 14, 1847 she made it clear that there would be no more entries; Sarah was clearly losing her battle saying “I feel so weary, discouraged and downhearted at times.”\textsuperscript{122} Sarah recorded in her journal that she was very weak in her lungs and couldn’t breathe and she had lost a lot of weight and had chills.\textsuperscript{123} Sarah’s death was recorded on September 22, 1847. The cause of her death was consumption, which was a common term for tuberculosis combined with overwork, stress and exposure. Just a week before her Sarah’s death her father passed away as well, leaving Sarah’s mother and sisters to bury both him and Sarah within the same week.\textsuperscript{124}

Tuberculosis was a big health concern around the United States during this time period and in Wisconsin it was one of the leading causes of death among adults. Part of the problem with tuberculosis was that it spread easily from one family member to another. The number of cases in women was greatly higher than among men, and women died more often than men did as well. It was commonly believed that this was because women were inside the house more often and not exposed to fresh air like men were.

\textsuperscript{120} Pratt., January 4, February 21, March 1, April 17, and May 9, 1847.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., July 1 and July 24, 1847.
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., September 14, 1847.
\textsuperscript{123} Pratt, September 14, 1847.
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., a relative had written a note that was with her papers and she is the one who listed the cause of death. .
Also, women were the primary caregivers for others who had the disease, thus making it more likely they would get the disease. Those who had the disease in earlier times like Sarah Pratt didn’t know that those with tuberculosis should be separated from other family members. This knowledge of how diseases spread and were contagious wasn’t commonly known for another forty years.\(^{125}\)

Lucy Hastings and her husband suffered from ill health from time to time as well, and she documented their health through her letters home always mentioning if they were feeling good or bad in her letters. The first few years that Lucy lives in Wisconsin she often wrote that they have never been in better health a factor she contributed to the Wisconsin air. However, Lucy does suffer from a severe illness that started in November of 1858. Smead had written in a letter home that Lucy was not well enough to write. She had been sick for almost a month at this point and he had missed work because she was so sick. He was able to hire a nurse to help him care for her, but she could only come a few days a week. He was thankful that neighbors were able to help out by bringing food. He felt the pressure to finish the house more for that winter to make it comfortable for his ill wife.\(^{126}\) At the end of December he wrote another letter that said Lucy was still very ill. He was worried that perhaps she would not get better in Eau Claire, and was wanting to take her east to see a doctor, but he had no spare money to make the trip. He would even be willing to sell the house in Eau Claire in order to pay for the journey home, but there were no buyers who had any money at all to buy the house. As mentioned earlier this was during the financial crisis that had hit Wisconsin and money was scarce. Lucy

\(^{125}\) Jensen, 155.
\(^{126}\) Hastings, November 7, 1858.
wrote a few lines at the end of the letter adding that she “sees nothing but suffering and death before me here.”

Although Smead’s family sent money to help send Lucy back east after the December letter, Lucy slowly recovers so they do not use the money to do so. In February she was writing letters again and claimed that “my health is again improving some, so that I can sit up some and walk a little.” Lucy never recovered 100% after this illness, but by the next summer she wrote that she could do her own work again, and that she was taking good care of herself. Two years later Lucy becomes ill again, and this time her illness lasts for about five months. Thankfully she recovers from this illness as well, although she is very thankful that they have been able to hire a girl to help out with the harder work.

In Lucy’s last letter home in April of 1863, she wrote about the large amount of illness that had been going on in Eau Claire the last six months. She wrote that sometimes she had two funerals a day to attend. Many of the deaths in Eau Claire were children. She said that the illnesses going around Eau Claire included fever, measles and diphtheria, and she suspected that the mild winter that they had might have attributed to the illness. In this letter Lucy Hastings claimed her health was good, better than it had been since they arrived in Wisconsin in fact. There was not another letter home from Lucy. Less than two months after the April 1863 letter Lucy passed away in Eau Claire on May 25, 1863 at the age of 44. Her obituary in the Eau Claire Leader Telegram was

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127 Hastings, December 30, 1858.
128 Ibid., February 22, 1859.
129 Ibid., May 3, 1859.
130 Ibid., September 16, 1861.
131 Ibid., April 9, 1863.
 dated May 28, 1863 and stated she passed away due to congestion of the lungs.\textsuperscript{132} It was unclear if she succumbed to the illness going around town, or if this illness was a reoccurrence of the previous illnesses that she had.

Ann Porter lived a much longer life than either Sarah or Lucy passing away on September 5\textsuperscript{th}, 1890 at the age of 69. Her husband Joseph wrote in the family bible that “She was a fine writer and a gifted musician, model wife and mother.”\textsuperscript{133} Ann and Joseph’s success and relative wealth had an impact on their lives due their ability to hire help on their farm to spare them from overwork as well as their access to medical care, a better variety of food and the ability to travel back east when they needed to helped them live a longer life than many others on the frontier.

**Religion and Faith**

Churches were built on the Wisconsin frontier almost as soon as settlers arrived. From wherever the settlers came from they brought with them strong religious beliefs, and when times got tough they needed to rely on these beliefs to help them get through the rough times. Faith was something that all three of these pioneer women had in great abundance, and clung too when times were rough. Their lives were not always comfortable or easy once they arrived in Wisconsin. They believed as thousands of others did that their lives would improve, if not today or tomorrow, perhaps next year or in five or ten years. They just needed to have faith and keep believing and continue to work hard. There was something that kept these women and their families going despite

\textsuperscript{132} “Obituary”, Eau Claire Free Press, 28 May 1863.
\textsuperscript{133} Lillian Porter, 200.
the hard times. James Davis, the author of *Frontier Illinois* talked about how pioneers always expressed home, writing:

This belief in the future—this sense of tomorrow and desire to be anticipatory in expectation-typified settlers. Hope focused settlers’ attention on tomorrow, helped them to endure present tribulations, and gave meaning to suffering. Very likely, hope was the settlers’ greatest resource.134

The earliest churches in Wisconsin were held in the houses of the earliest settlers until a church could be built. Sometimes these earliest meetings consisted of women only while the men went about their other business, but if space was found the meetings contained groups of families. Women made sure that their main rooms were clean and ready for these impromptu church meetings and they took advantage of any traveling priest or preacher that came through the area.135 Lucy and David Hastings were one of these families that held church in their home. They held the first known gathering of Methodists in Eau Claire by hosting prayer meeting in their house in the fall of 1857, and together with other couples they helped start and build the first Methodist church in Eau Claire.136

During the 1840s and 1850s the number of churches in Wisconsin dramatically increased. Up until this time churches had largely been Catholic as priests had been in the state since the fur trading days, and had worked as missionaries with the Native Americans. As more and more settlers arrived in the new state other denominations started to appear, including Episcopal, Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist and Presbyterian. These churches not only functioned as social and religious centers for settlers, but also as a platform for women to take up activist causes later on. Popular activist causes women

135 Krueger, 164-165.
136 Bailey, 518.
commonly supported in Wisconsin were the idea of temperance, or stopping the abuse of alcohol, as well as property rights for married women.\textsuperscript{137}

Religion was also important to settlers, especially to women. Sarah Pratt mentioned going to church on more than one occasion, and sometimes it did not matter if the meeting was her own religion. She went to whatever meeting was available, and if she wasn’t able to go for a while she wrote about how she missed going greatly.\textsuperscript{138} On Sarah’s death bed she wrote “I feel so downhearted at times.” In the same entry she talked about getting her strength from the lord and that she would continue on the best that she could. When she died a week later, she did so believing in something greater than herself.\textsuperscript{139}

Lucy Hastings also relied on her faith to keep her going especially when she was homesick and desired to see her family more than anything. In February of 1858 she wrote that “we have the same God to watch over us here.”\textsuperscript{140} Reflecting upon the New Year in 1860 Lucy Hastings writes

\begin{quote}
“We know not what is before us and I often think it is well we do not. For if we did we should hardly think we could endure the many trials and changes awaiting us.”\textsuperscript{141}
\end{quote}

She was reflecting upon the many hardships they had endured so far in their new lives in Wisconsin. Those who knew her in the village of Eau Claire knew that her faith was important to her. Her obituary described Lucy as a woman of great faith, saying “Of her it is safe to say, she lived a Christian life – she died a Christian death.”\textsuperscript{142}

\textsuperscript{137} Janik, Erica, 62.
\textsuperscript{138} Pratt, March 22, 1846.
\textsuperscript{139} Ibid., September 14, 1847.
\textsuperscript{140} Hastings, February 26, 1858.
\textsuperscript{141} Ibid., January 1, 1860.
\textsuperscript{142} “Obituary”, Eau Claire Free Press, 28 May 1863.
Anne Porter’s journal entries were often laced with a hint of faith or reflection as well. She often reflected upon her life and was sure to give thanks and praise when it was necessary. On her 13 year anniversary on February 21st, 1860 she wrote that married “life has not passed this far without a clouded sky, but it has had its sunshine too.”\textsuperscript{143} She prayed that she could live the next 13 years in a way that she could look back on and not regret and she gave thanks for the blessings that she had received in her life to this point.\textsuperscript{144}

**Conclusion**

Moving to a new place, so far from home and a place that was unknown, so far must have been a challenge to these three women, and thousands of others like them. However, these women had to put their fears behind them and be ready for whatever might happen to them and their families. They had to be the homemaker, the wife, the mother, the doctor and provide for their families in the worst circumstances. It is safe to say that settlers could not have moved to this new area without the support of their wives, mothers and daughters. These ordinary women and thousands like them showed bravery and had a faith in what they were doing that kept their families and themselves going.

Many settlers to Wisconsin and other Western states had a sad ending, some like Sarah Pratt died tragically young, before even marrying or starting a family themselves. Some like Lucy Hastings lingered with illness for a long time before passing away, leaving behind a spouse, and sometimes small children. However, there are many success stories as well, including Ann Porter’s story. She and her husband Joseph made a

\textsuperscript{143} Porter, February 21, 1860.
\textsuperscript{144} Ibid., February 21, 1860.
success of their farm, enjoyed good health, were fairly well off and lived in their new home well into their lives. They had healthy children and grandchildren that would continue the legacy they had started and who helped care for them and the farm when they were older. It was the stories like Ann’s that gave thousands of others hope, that they too would succeed in the new world. It was this hope that sent them to an unknown land in search of a better life. More importantly it was the bravery of Sarah Pratt, Ann Porter and Lucy Hastings, that gave thousands of other women the courage to set out into this new world.
Bibliography:

Primary Sources:


Theodore and Sophie Bost immigrated to the United States from Switzerland. They were married after an extended courtship through letters. This book contains letters from both Sophie and Theodore and covers many details of their daily lives. Although Theodore and Sophie come from well to do families, they struggled greatly their first few years in Minnesota.

Hastings, Lucy A. *Family Correspondence*. 1838.

Lucy Hastings writes several letters to her family members back east and in Michigan. She mentions several times in these letter the hardships her and her husband David faced in Wisconsin including poor finances, health problems and encounters with Native Americans. These letters give an insight on Lucy Hastings day to day life, as well as conditions in the Eau Claire and Oxford Wisconsin areas.

Pratt, Sarah K. *Sarah Pratt Diaries*. 1847.

Sarah Pratt traveled from New York to Rock County Wisconsin with her sister to visit their other sister and her husband. She keeps an almost daily account of her journey and her life once they reach Wisconsin. Topics included in her diary include day to day life with her sisters, teaching school in Wisconsin, her health, and people she met in Wisconsin.


Ann Porter was a farm wife near Cooksville, Wisconsin. She settled there with her husband around 1848. In this collection there are nine letters, diaries, and expense books detailing the farm and house expenses. Included in the expense books and diaries and such thinks as recipes and what they planted in their gardens, and how many turkeys they sold. These papers give a very detailed look into Ann’s day to day life.
Secondary Sources:


This is a comprehensive volume covering the History of Eau Claire county, including the history of the villages of Eau Claire.


The second volume of the History of Wisconsin series, given great detail to those coming to Eau Claire during it’s process of becoming a state. Much information is included in this book including where and when people settled, common illnesses in the state, and other events happening in the state during this time period.


This book covers the settlement of Wisconsin’s neighboring state Illinois. Much of the information on settlers and women especially can mirror what women in Wisconsin might have dealt with in their settlement of Wisconsin.


This book is based on the diary of a woman named Martha Farnsworth. The diaries cover the years from 1882-1922 where she lived in Kansas on the frontier. The diaries cover her years in Kansas including her life as a wife, mother, widow and then a remarriage. This is a detailed account of her life, and should be quite useful for more background information on life during this time period on the frontier.


A recent history of Wisconsin written based largely on the *History of Wisconsin* volumes. This is an easy to read book, with a fresh look at much of the important history of Wisconsin.


This book has many stories about women in Frontier Wisconsin that could be very useful for background in my topic. These stories share women’s day to day lives, their challenges and their hardships. Also they manage show the strength and
accomplishments of these women. It also manages to create a good background story of Wisconsin’s history, including important information on women’s roles in their households and common problems in the state during these time periods.


This is a series of articles that covered the role of mothers on the Wisconsin frontier. I read this last year and they seem like they may be very helpful to this topic. Topics included in the articles include women playing the role of innkeeper, helping religion start in a community they live in, playing the role of teacher to children and family sizes, illnesses and homesickness.


This is a collection of stories about women who lived in Wisconsin and were important to the state’s history in some way. The book includes some stories from frontier times and women who liven then in it.


Written by a relative of Ann Porter about Ann’s life in Wisconsin, closely follows the journals Anne wrote herself, but gives some additional information on Ann and her family.


This book is a history of the state of Wisconsin. It provides a great overall background of what was going on in different parts of the state during the settlement times.


Wisconsin Frontier with a heavy emphasis on the settler/Native American interaction. This is what the book mostly focuses on, however it does take the time to focus on the settler’s daily life. It is in the small break that the usefulness of the book for the purpose of this paper comes out. This book focuses on the daily lives of women and their roles in frontier society.