



Peck Bur Oak, c. 1837, from an 1869 painting by E. E. Bailey

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The Peck Bur Oak

Madison

The bur oak tree beside the Peck cabin in Madison witnessed an impressive list of pioneer firsts: first residence in the fledgling settlement, first tavern, restaurant, hotel and post office, site of the first wedding and birthplace of the first white child born in the capital city.

Eben and Rosaline Peck had decided to move from the Brigham farm in Blue Mounds on the advice of Judge James E. Doty, who had reason to be optimistic about Madison's potential for growth. Eben arrived first to start construction of the cabin during the winter of 1837 on land bought as soon as the territorial legislature, nudged by Doty, chose Madison as the location of the state capitol. Eben's pregnant wife followed, as described in *The History of Madison, Dane County and Surroundings*, published in 1877: "Snow and the howling of wolves awakened

Mrs. Peck from her slumbers in a tent, three miles from Madison, on Saturday, April 15, 1837, and [with her four-year-old son Victor] she pushed on through the storm to the site of her more substantial dwelling, where she sat down under a tree in her wagon, twenty-five miles from the nearest white residents at Blue Mounds and nearly one hundred miles from the settlers at Milwaukee. The building was not far enough advanced to satisfy the demands of the hostess and a temporary habitation was constructed...."

In the blizzardly desolation of her arrival with only a bed quilt to throw over her own and Victor's head, Rosaline must at least have appreciated the presence of that stalwart oak!

With the cabin finished a few weeks later, Judge Doty, ever the helpful guest, spent a day with "all the available masculinity of Madison" plastering Mrs. Peck's kitchen in order to ready the premises for boarders. Once plastered, the "little hotel was speedily crowded with guests." As *The History* relates, "About two weeks after the arrival of Mrs. Peck in

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Madison, a party of 15 men came on from Milwaukee via Janesville, and the work of the hostess began in earnest." Besides Judge Doty, Colonel Ebenezer Brigham, first settler in Dane County; Commissioner Augustus A. Bird, one of the three men elected to supervise the construction of the capitol; and other "historic personages" were frequent visitors. A traveler from England, one George Featherstonehaugh, when safely back in London, wrote that Mrs. Peck's coffee was not good. No less a luminary than General Simeon Mills, a prominent early Madison citizen, disputed this slander, commending Mrs. Peck's "excellent coffee." In fact, Mrs. Peck reportedly set a table that was "a marvel to beholders" and "cleanliness, the first requisite towards elegance, was a welcome feature from the beginning."

July 4, 1837, marked a historic occasion: the laying of the capitol cornerstone. Although others dispute the numbers, Mrs. Peck described a celebration of the event that went on for several days and involved two to three hundred persons, including the friendly Winnebago Indians living a short distance away on the shores of Lake Monona.

A year later the Peck "tavern stand," as Mrs. Peck phrased it, came under the proprietorship of R. L. Ream, father of the famous sculptor Vinnie Ream, when the Pecks went into full time farming. Under Ream's management, the Madison House "charges were not very moderate, as 'two feet by six of floor

could be had for the night,' only upon payment of 'two pence per square foot,' and 'the weary traveler might spread his own blanket, using his saddle or portmanteau for a pillow, rejoicing that he had so good a bed.'"

The Peck cabin, after 20 years as the Madison House, was razed in 1857. The oak stood until 1930, when workmen preparing the site for the Farm Utility Building cut it down. The state office building GEF III now occupies that spot with a plaque noting the site's history.

With all other traces of that early history being so completely obliterated, it is pleasant to recall the impact that Eben and Rosaline Peck had on the community, as summarized in the above-quoted *History*: "In her house the earliest visitors to Madison found a home, in her dining room the gayeties of several seasons found their earliest expression. Her husband as justice of the peace united in the bonds of wedlock the first couple lawfully married in this city, and after the irrevocable knot had been tied ... the violin of the justice's lady gladdened the hearts of the assembled throng while they threaded the mazes of the dance. In the old log house was born Miss Wisconsiniana Victoria Peck, the first child that saw the light of this city... Mrs. Peck and her husband were the pioneer settlers...."

Source: Frank Custer