Under the Flag of France

Although American Indians lived in the area of present-day Wisconsin for several thousand years before the arrival of the French—numbering about 20,000 when the French arrived—the written history of the state began with the accounts of French explorers. The French explored the area, named places, and established trading posts, but left relatively little mark on it. They were interested in the fur trade, rather than agricultural settlement, and were never present in large numbers.

1634 Jean Nicolet: First known European to reach Wisconsin. Sought Northwest Passage.


1661 Father Rene Menard: First missionary to Wisconsin Indians.

1665 Father Claude Allouez founded mission at La Pointe.

1666 Nicholas Perrot opened fur trade with Wisconsin Indians.

1672 Father Allouez and Father Louis Andre built St. Francois Xavier mission at De Pere.

Jean Nicolet, a French explorer, is the first known European to arrive in Wisconsin, making landfall in 1634 at Green Bay. He is depicted in this commissioned painting from 1907 meeting a group of Menominee Indians, wearing a Chinese robe and brandishing two pistols.
1673 Louis Jolliet and Father Jacques Marquette discovered Mississippi River.

1678 Daniel Greysolon Sieur du Lhut (Duluth) explored western end of Lake Superior.

1685 Perrot made Commandant of the West.

1690 Perrot discovered lead mines in Wisconsin and Iowa.

1701–38 Fox Indian Wars.

(top) Father Jacques Marquette and Louis Jolliet traveled the Mississippi River in 1673. (above left) Lead mining by Indians in the southwest part of the state was first noticed by the French in 1690, and became a driving force for white settlement in the area during the 1800s. (above right) Important locations related to the Fox Indian Wars from 1701 to 1738 are shown in a historical map.
1755 Wisconsin Indians, under Charles Langlade, helped defeat British General Braddock.

1763 Treaty of Paris. Wisconsin became part of British colonial territory.

Under the Flag of England

Wisconsin experienced few changes under British control. It remained the western edge of European penetration into the American continent, important only because of the fur trade. French traders plied their trade and British and colonial traders began to appear, but Europeans continued to be visitors rather than settlers.

1761 Fort at Green Bay accepted by English.

1763 Conspiracy of Pontiac. Two Englishmen killed by Indians at Muscoda.

1764 Charles Langlade settled at Green Bay. First permanent settlement.

1766 Jonathan Carver visited Wisconsin seeking Northwest Passage.

1774 Quebec Act made Wisconsin a part of Province of Quebec.

1781 Traditional date of settlement at Prairie du Chien.


Achieving Territorial Status

In spite of the Treaty of Paris, Wisconsin remained British in all but title until after the War of 1812. In 1815, the American army established control. Gradually, Indian title to the southeastern half of the state was extinguished. Lead mining brought the first heavy influx of settlers and ended the dominance of the fur trade in the economy of the area. The lead mining period ran from about 1824 to 1861. Almost half of the 11,683 people who lived in the territory in 1836 were residents of the lead mining district in the southwestern corner of the state.

1787 Under the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, Wisconsin was made part of the Northwest Territory. The governing units for the Wisconsin area prior to statehood were:

1787–1800 Northwest Territory.
1800–1809  Indiana Territory.
1809–1818  Illinois Territory.
1818–1836  Michigan Territory.
1836–1848  Wisconsin Territory.

1795  Jacques Vieu established trading posts at Kewaunee, Manitowoc, and Sheboygan. Made headquarters at Milwaukee.

1804  William Henry Harrison’s treaty with Indians at St. Louis. United States extinguished Indian title to lead region (a cause of Black Hawk War).

1814  Fort Shelby built at Prairie du Chien. Captured by English and name changed to Fort McKay.

1815  War with England concluded. Fort McKay abandoned by British.

1816  Fort Shelby rebuilt at Prairie du Chien (renamed Fort Crawford). Astor’s American Fur Company began operations in Wisconsin.

1818  Solomon Juneau bought trading post of Jacques Vieu at Milwaukee.


1822  New York Indians (Oneida, Stockbridge, Munsee, and Brothertown) moved to Wisconsin. First mining leases in southwest Wisconsin.

1825  Indian Treaty established tribal boundaries.
1826–27  Winnebago Indian War. Surrender of Chief Red Bird.

1828  Fort Winnebago begun at Portage.

1832  Black Hawk War.

1833  Land treaty with Indians cleared southern Wisconsin land titles. First newspaper, Green Bay Intelligencer, established.

1834  Land offices established at Green Bay and Mineral Point. First public road laid out.

1835  First steamboat arrived at Milwaukee. First bank in Wisconsin opened at Green Bay.

1836  Act creating Territory of Wisconsin signed April 20 by President Andrew Jackson. (Provisions of Ordinance of 1787 made part of the act.)

Wisconsin Territory

Wisconsin’s population reached 305,000 by 1850. About half of the new immigrants were from New York and New England. The rest were principally from England, Scotland, Ireland, Germany, and Scandinavia. New York’s Erie Canal
gave Wisconsin a water outlet to the Atlantic Ocean and a route for new settlers. Wheat was the primary cash crop for most of the newcomers. State politics revolved around factions headed by James Doty and Henry Dodge. As political parties developed, the Democrats proved dominant throughout the period.

1836 Capital located at Belmont—Henry Dodge appointed governor, July 4, by President Andrew Jackson. First session of legislature. Madison chosen as permanent capital.


1838 Territorial legislature met in Madison. Milwaukee and Rock River Canal Company chartered.

1840 First school taxes authorized and levied.
1841 James Doty appointed governor by President John Tyler.

1842 C.C. Arndt shot and killed in legislature by James R. Vineyard.

1844 Nathaniel P. Tallmadge appointed governor. Wisconsin Phalanx (a utopian colony) established at Ceresco (Ripon).


1846 Congress passed enabling act for admission of Wisconsin as state. First Constitutional Convention met in Madison.


1848 Second Constitution adopted. President James K. Polk signed bill on May 29 making Wisconsin a state.