Old Belmont, A Sense of Place and Time
First Capitol Educational Packet

First Capitol
19101 County Highway G
Belmont, WI 53510

608-987-2122
608-987-3738 (fax)
firstcapitol@wisconsinhistory.org
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Educators:

The First Capitol Historic Site Educational Packet, Old Belmont, A Sense of Place and Time was produced by the State Historical Society of Wisconsin and was funded in part by the Wisconsin Sesquicentennial Commission with funds from individual and corporate contributions and the State of Wisconsin.

The educational packet is designed for use by fourth grade students to enhance an on-site visit to First Capitol Historic Site. However, many of the activities can be done in the classroom and can also be adapted for use in other grade levels. The packet is designed in such a way that it can be copied and new activities can be added to it in the future. You are encouraged to share the information and activities with colleagues.

The packet matches a number of educational standards and benchmarks for the 4th grade social studies curriculum standards:

Content Standard: History SS2, A4
  Know important events and famous people in Wisconsin and US history as they relate to the following topics and time periods:
  *the transition from territory to statehood, 1787-1848
  *immigration and settlement
  *mining, lumber, and agriculture

Content Standard: History SS2, B4
  Know historical examples of cooperation and interdependence among individuals, groups, and nations as they relate to the following topics and time periods:
  *the transition from territory to statehood, 1787-1848
  *immigration and settlement
  *mining, lumber, and agriculture

Content Standard: Civics SS3, B4
  Understand the basic purpose of local, state, and national government in American society.

Content Standard: Behavioral SS5, A4
  Understand the contributions prominent Wisconsin Citizens have made to the state and the nation.

Content Standard: Behavioral SS5, B4
  Understand the connections between the local community and other places in Wisconsin, the United States, and the world.
Old Belmont, A Sense of Place and Time

Introduction
Belmont was established as the capitol of the Wisconsin Territory in October 1836. As legislators arrived in the town, they found a lodging house, a boarding house, and the Council House. The new town contained places of business, too; Lobaugh’s blacksmith shop, Dillon’s store just north of the Council House, John Moore’s tavern north of town, and John Coons’s store approximately a half-mile to the east. Homes existed as well, including the governor’s residence and about six frame houses. The post office sat about three fourths of a mile to the southeast and the Belmont Gazette was published from a small lean-to structure attached to the lodging house. Original sources do not mention the presence of a courthouse building in Belmont in 1836. The building often called the Court House was probably built as the lodging house and later nicknamed the courthouse when occupied by Chief Justice Dunn’s family.

The Legislature met in Belmont from 25 October to 9 December 1836. After a long, acrimonious debate, the legislature decided that Madison would be the permanent seat of government for Wisconsin and that Burlington, Iowa would be the site of legislative sessions until 1839. These decisions had an immediate impact on the community of Belmont. Many people and several businesses left almost immediately. But not everyone moved on. Belmont maintained its post office, and several other businesses until 1867. At that time, railroad tracks were laid approximately 3 miles to the southeast of the Platteville branch of the Mineral Point Railroad. Residents of Belmont moved and began to set up a town along the Mineral Point Railroad tracks. This new community became Belmont, and what remained of Old Belmont came to be known as Grandview. In 1884, the Chicago & Northwestern Railroad established a station north of the cluster of government buildings at Old Belmont, and the small community was renamed Leslie.

Today, First Capitol Historic Site represents one of the earliest chapters of Wisconsin history interpreted by the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. The site is located three miles northwest of the village of Belmont on County Road G in northwest Lafayette County. The site consists of two structures associated with the 1836 Territorial Legislative session, the Council House where the legislators met for 42 days and the lodging house for the legislators which later became the residence of territorial Supreme Court Chief Justice Charles Dunn. Both structures eventually were used as residences and later converted to livestock barns. In 1910 the Wisconsin Federation of Women’s Clubs began raising funds for the restoration of the buildings. In 1924 the Council House was moved to the current site and restored. In 1956 the lodging house was moved to the same site and restored. Initially, the site was operated by the Department of Natural Resources. In 1994 the site became part of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.
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Pre-visit Activities
Elvira Jane Moore Letters

Background:

Elvira Jane Moore was a real girl living in Belmont in the 1830s. Born in Tennessee in 1820, Elvira traveled with her parents, John and Nancy (Stalcup) Moore, to Missouri and Illinois before coming to Wisconsin. By the time the family settled in Belmont in 1833, Elvira had two younger sisters and a younger brother. The Moores came to Belmont to establish a hotel on the wagon road from Galena to Mineral Point. John Moore had previously operated a hotel at Prairie Springs, just south of Mineral Point and served as the captain of Fort Jackson at Mineral Point during the Black Hawk War. In the spring of 1836, 16-year-old Elvira married a neighbor, Moses Whiteside, and continued to live in Belmont.

These letters were created for this packet, written to Elvira’s maternal uncle, John Stalcup who continued to reside in Sumner County, Tennessee. Although fictional, they are based on the outlines of the real Elvira Moore’s life. They describe what she could have seen and experienced during the years just prior to, during and after the Territorial Legislative session in the fall of 1836. The last letter was written in 1880.

Procedure:

Students should read the letters and discuss the information that Elvira is sharing with her uncle. Ask students to consider the following questions. What is Elvira describing and why? Why has she chosen these events? Do Elvira’s letters give you a feeling for what it would have been like to live in old Belmont? How is Elvira’s life similar to or different from your own? Have students write a letter to Elvira telling her about life in their own communities today.
Letter #1

Mineral Point, Michigan Territory
August 19, 1832

Dear Uncle John,

There has been quite a stir this summer here in the southwestern part of the Michigan Territory. The Indians who used to live in these parts came back from their new lands on the west side of the Mississippi River. They attacked a few settlements, but have now been driven back across the River.

Last spring, Father decided to sell the tavern at Prairie Springs and move here to Mineral Point. We had just arrived when news of the Indian troubles came. A fort was quickly built just below the settlement at Jerusalem Spring. A militia of about 60 men was quartered at the fort. Father was chosen to be the captain of the militia.

Mother gave birth to another baby this summer. Her name is Mary. I have tried to help Mother as much as possible. Emily and Alphonso are still very young and there is much work to be done around the house. Each day I empty the ash from the wood stove. I help with the washing and cooking and sewing.

Father wants to return to the tavern business, but there are already several hotels operating in this town. He thinks it would be better to locate about a day’s travel away. Mineral Point is the biggest town in the lead region. In just the five years since lead was discovered here, many settlers have come. There are stores, blacksmiths, and many miners. With the Indian troubles now over, everyone thinks that more miners will arrive soon.

I must close now, but I will write again with more news.

Your niece,
Elvira Jane Moore
Belmont, Michigan Territory
September 23, 1833

Dear Uncle John,

We have moved again. With the Indian troubles now behind us, it is safe to live away from town and forts. Father has decided to start up in the tavern business again. Our new home is about ten miles southwest of Mineral Point along the road from that place to Galena, Illinois. Every day, ox-carts loaded with lead from the mines travel on this road to Galena where the mineral is loaded on boats for shipment down the Mississippi River. Father believes that the oxcart drivers will stop to spend the night as we are about a day’s travel from Mineral Point. He expects other travelers to stop as well.

Father has spent most of this summer building the tavern. It is now almost done. The foundation stones were quarried from a local mound. The frame was built of oak timbers cut from a local oak grove. The siding boards came from a lumber mill on the Platte River near the settlement of Platteville which is about six miles southeast of here. The tavern has a dining room on the first floor and sleeping rooms for the guests on the second floor. The kitchen is in a wing attached to the main building and our quarters are on the second floor.

Our land is surrounded by a broad prairie. The grasses grow very tall and are now well over my head. Mother tells us not to stray far from the tavern for fear that we will get lost in the grass and not be able to find our way home. The land hereabouts is gently rolling. There are two hills nearby called Platte Mounds. From the tops of them, I can see for miles. Father hopes that they will help travelers to find his tavern for they can be seen from anywhere in the lead region.

There are a few settlers in this area. The Welsh family has a small farm with a log house just north of here. The Kirkpatricks have a house and field at the base of the West Platte Mound about two miles to the west. The Eastmen farm is about a mile east, just beyond the East Platte Mound. A young man named Moses Whiteside has just moved to the area as well.

Although we are far away on the frontier, mother often tells stories of her childhood with you in Tennessee. Please write when you can, the nearest post office is at Mineral Point.

Please remember me to my cousins.

Your niece,

Elvira Jane Moore
Letter #3

Belmont, Michigan Territory
November 15, 1834

Dear Uncle John,

I now have another sister. She is named Sarah. We are now a family of seven, Father, Mother, Emily, Alphonso, Mary, Sarah and me.

Last week, I traveled to Mineral Point with Father for the land sale. The land where Father built the tavern was owned by the federal government as was all land hereabouts. A land office was established this year at Mineral Point with the first sale set for November 10th. Father was afraid that someone else might try to buy our land. Because we had already built on it, Father was able to buy 80 acres for the minimum price of $1.25 per acre. With all of the settlers in town to buy land, Mineral Point was a very busy place. After buying our land and purchasing some supplies, we returned home.

A school has been started in this area. Some students come to school every day, but most come only when they can get away from the chores at the farm. Now that the crops have been harvested, students are coming regularly. Emily comes with me most days, but the other children are too young to attend. Mr. Boyer is our teacher. We study arithmetic, reading, and civics. The older children help the younger children with their lessons.

There have been many travelers stopping at the tavern this year. There seem to be more loads of mineral on the road every month. The miners must be very busy.

I wish I could see you, but the Michigan Territory is such a long way from Tennessee.

Yours truly, your niece,

Elvira Jane Moore
Dear Uncle John,

Your nieces and nephews, Emily, Alphonso, Mary, Sarah and I are all well, as are Mother and Father. It has been a busy summer with many travelers stopping here as they pass on the lead road. We have a large garden this year and will soon be putting up vegetables for the winter.

This past spring one of our neighbors, Mr. Moses Whiteside, began courting me. He has a farm and digs for lead as well. Mr. Whiteside arrived in 1828 from Illinois, then went to St. Louis to work for a few years. He returned about two years ago, just as we came here. We get along very well and he has asked me to become his wife. He is 29 years old. Mother is concerned that I am too young to marry and that Mr. Whiteside is much older than I am. I have reminded her that she was 18 when she married Father and that he is 17 years older than she. She does not seem to be convinced yet. A good word from you might help.

A few settlers have taken up residence in the area this summer. Now that the lands can be purchased, people seem more willing to clear land and build houses. Many of the travelers who stop by the tavern ask about where the good land is and how far they still have to go for water. Mineral Point has grown to be quite a town and more people are settling along the Platte River near Mr. Rountree’s place.

We have heard that the eastern part of the territory, the part east of Lake Michigan, may become a state soon. What will then become of this part of the territory I do not know.

Yours,

Elvira Jane Moore
Letter #5

Belmont, Wisconsin Territory
July 9, 1836

Dear Uncle John,

Although I still live in the same place, I now live in the new Territory of Wisconsin! On July 4th we all traveled to Mineral Point to celebrate the creation of the Territory of Wisconsin and the swearing in of our new governor, Henry Dodge. Everyone wants to know where the territorial legislature will meet. Governor Dodge has ordered a census to be made and says he will announce the date and place of the meeting when it is completed.

In April, Father sold 80 acres of land to John Atchison. Mr. Atchison hired Captain Craig, a surveyor from Galena, Illinois, to lay out the streets and lots for a town. The plat map has a large parcel which is for territorial buildings. It seems that Mr. Atchison wants Governor Dodge to locate the seat of the territorial government here. Mr. Atchison must think that the governor will do so because he has already begun to construct two buildings. One is for the legislature to meet in and the other is for lodging the legislature.

I was married to Moses Whiteside on May 3rd at Father’s tavern. Several of our neighbors, the Gentrys, the Kirkpatricks, Mr. Holshouser, and the Welshes all came to celebrate with my family. My husband has purchased land for a farm about a mile distant from Mother and Father’s home. I am very happy and hope to be a good wife for Mr. Whiteside.

Please remember me to my cousins, and write when you can. Letters can be addressed to Mrs. Moses Whiteside at the Mineral Point post office.

Sincerely, your niece,
Elvira
Belmont, Wisconsin Territory  
November 29, 1836  

Dear Uncle John,

Our little town of Belmont has become quite a place in the last few months. In early September, Governor Dodge announced that the first meeting of the Territorial Legislature would be held in Belmont. While Mineral Point, Green Bay, Prairie du Chien and Dubuque are all larger than we are, Belmont is now the most important place in the whole territory!

In no time people started coming here from all parts of the territory. Mr. Atchison has had to work very hard to have all of the buildings ready for use. Father and Mother put up as many supplies as possible for all of the people who are staying at the tavern. My husband spent several weeks this fall as a workman constructing buildings.

We have quite a town now. There are two dry goods stores with a selection of books, clothing and spirits. The store run by Mr. Coons also serves as a post office so we can now receive letters in our own town. There is a large building for the Legislature’s meetings and another of similar design which is for lodging the members. A house has been built for the governor and his family. There is even a newspaper, the Belmont Gazette, which is printed here each Tuesday.

The legislative session will be ending soon. After much debate, it has been decided that the next sessions will be held in Burlington and then, once Judge Doty has it built, the permanent capital will be at Madison about 60 miles east of here. I hope that Belmont will continue to prosper.

Your niece,  
Elvira Jane Whiteside
Belmont, Wisconsin Territory
July 20, 1837

Dear Uncle John,

Our town of Belmont is much quieter this summer than it was a year ago. There are no new buildings going up and a few buildings are empty. Dillon’s store has closed. The Belmont Gazette stopped publication in April and the printing press has been moved to Burlington where the legislature will now meet. We still have a store and a blacksmith shop, but they are not doing much business. After being so busy last fall and winter, Father’s tavern has grown very quiet.

Charles Dunn, the chief judge of the territorial courts, has purchased the lodging house that was built for the legislators and intends to use it for his family’s home. Governor Dodge continued to reside here through the spring, but he too has returned to his home north of Mineral Point. There was an auction this spring of the tables and chairs from the meeting house. Several of the local residents now have new furniture.

My sisters and brothers continue to grow. Emily is now twelve and has taken on many of the chores of helping Mother raise the younger ones which I used to do. She is very helpful. My husband Moses and I are well. He broke several more acres of land on the farm this spring and we hope for good crops.

Please remember me to your children.

Your niece,
Elvira Whiteside
Belmont, Wisconsin  
May 3, 1880

Dear Mr. Butterfield,

I understand that you are writing a book on the history of Lafayette County, Wisconsin and that you are seeking information on the history of the town Belmont at its original site, now called Grandview. Perhaps some of my memories of that place will help you.

I first moved to Belmont with my family almost 50 years ago in 1833 when I was 13 years old. My father, John Moore, started a tavern there to serve as a stopping place for travelers along the lead road from Mineral Point to Galena. As I am sure you have learned elsewhere, 1836 was quite a year in Belmont. That spring a man, I think his name was Atchison, bought a parcel of land from my father in order to lay out a new town. When the governor of the new Territory of Wisconsin, Henry Dodge, decided that the territorial legislature would meet at Belmont, Mr. Atchison had to work very hard to get all the buildings ready.

The year 1836 was also an important year for me. On May 3rd of that year (44 years ago today) I was married to Moses Whiteside. Mr. Whiteside had recently returned to the area after working in St. Louis for a short time. We lived in our home in Belmont until my husband died in 1870. I still own our 270 acre farm there and the 320 acres from my father’s estate.

After the territorial legislature left Belmont following its session in 1836, the town began to decline. One of the stores closed right away and the newspaper stopped publishing the next spring. As settlers came to the area, they did not build houses in town, but started farms instead. The final end of the original town came when the railroad tracks from Calamine to Platteville were laid about three miles to the south in 1867. Soon after, a new town began to spring up along the tracks. At first it was called Belmont Station and then New Belmont, but now it is just called Belmont as most of the stores and residents of the old town site have moved to this place. I moved here after my husband died.

Some people have stayed in what is now called Grandview. Judge Dunn bought the old lodging house and has used it as his family’s home now for more than forty years. In December 1849, when the State of Wisconsin was just in its second year, Governor Dewey married the judge’s daughter Catherine in the house. That was the most important event since the Legislature left.

I hope that you find the information from my recollections helpful for your book.

Mrs. Elvira Whiteside