

Michigan Genealogical Council Delegates' Meeting
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Michigan & Wisconsin Sister Daughters of the Empire State

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Colonial Era considerations

The French exploration of the early colonial period, exemplified in the expeditions of Marquette and Joliet throughout the interior of the continent, and the establishment of French-focused settlements at Saint Ignace and Green Bay, allowed for movement and rudimentary commerce to pass from modern-day Wisconsin into present-day Michigan. This pattern, then, of interplay between the two states preceded the establishment of the American union by a century, and continued into the period of Michigan's dominance over the upper Midwest in the territorial era. Subsequent to statehood, the two formed similar governments, relied on similar political classes, and drew earliest laws and structures from those of New York state.

Once the British gained Quebec and French Canada at the close of the Seven Years' (French & Indian War, to Americans' ears), more British-rooted settlers moved inland by going north into the new British domains. As with their French predecessors, these hardy souls began to move westward across the region, through modern Ontario, into present-day Michigan. Unlike the French whose soldiers intermingled and intermarried with the native Indian peoples, the British Americans rarely did so. The English had long treated the indigenous peoples with suspicion and hostility, and the hostilities continued well into the era of American control over the southern Great Lakes region.

European immigrants to North America set into their descendants a desire to move, move and move again. After an area had been sufficiently civilized, many folks were ready and happy to move along to newer venues, more open spaces...and places with

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lower costs of living and land. Accordingly, Horace Greeley’s longstanding advice of the nineteenth century, “Go West, young man,” was frequently repeated by thousands of people across the early federal years throughout that century. With the 1890 census showing that the open prairies had finally been tamed, at least according to historian Frederick Jackson Turner, large-scale movements waned. Still, generations of folk with restless feet have continued to migrate out of “where they’re from,” to “where they’re going to be.” Let’s look at influences for migration, and the ways in which north-easterners, particularly New Yorkers, moved westward to the interior of the country.

The Canal

Outbound migration from New York, prior to the opening of the Erie Canal, was often limited to a southerly course across New Jersey, into Pennsylvania and Maryland toward the Ohio River. A generation of Long Islanders followed that arc into Virginia and then upward toward Ohio around the turn of the nineteenth century. Interior New York state was a vast area, largely unsettled, until after the Revolution and later. Transplanted New Englanders often populated the Hudson valley and the area near Lake Champlain, but traversing the state westward toward Buffalo was a slow and often challenging prospect.

Even as the Erie Canal was being dug and opened over short spans prior to its full completion at Lake Erie, it was helping move goods, services and people into New York’s upstate regions. Once opened to the Great Lakes, it proved the great drain through which both New Englanders and New Yorkers left their old homes behind and moved westward to populate the upper Midwest and Great Plains. By 1850, after a generation, the numbers of transplants were significant. The census taken that year revealed the following regarding emigrants to the various states:²

Residence	Origin	Count
Ohio	New York	83,979
Indiana	New York	24,310
Illinois	New York	67,180
Michigan	New York	133,756
Wisconsin	New York	68,595
Minnesota Territory	New York	488

² *Report of the Superintendent of the Census for December 1, 1852* (Washington: House of Representatives, 1853), 16-19.

Michigan was the home to more native New Yorkers at that time than every other state, save New York itself. Ohio, Wisconsin, and Illinois followed in rank order.³

Residence	Origin of Most Non-natives	Count
Ohio	Pennsylvania	200,634
Indiana	Pennsylvania	44,245
Illinois	New York	67,180
Michigan	New York	133,756
Wisconsin	New York	68,595
Minnesota Territory	New York	488

Michigan's native-born population in 1850, was scarcely more than the number of New York immigrants: 140,468 v. 133,756. In Wisconsin, the pattern was reversed: 63,015 native-born Wisconsinites v. 68,595 New York natives. New York natives made up more than 10% of Minnesota Territory's population of 4,007 that year, the largest bloc of early settlers. Of the total of nearly 2.7 million New York-born residents counted in the 1850 census, nearly 550,000 lived outside New York state; roughly 270,000 of those lived in the three Midwestern states of Michigan, Wisconsin and Illinois. Of those native to these states, a significant portion must have been the offspring of New York-born parents, though a count has not been produced.⁴ Over time, of course, that concentration within these states would only have been diluted by further immigration and natural population growth. These early arrivals played an outsized role in the development of government and policy in these states, with many of their early legislators, governors, representatives and senators coming from the pool of Empire State migrants.

Political Leadership

Over the course of the first forty years of statehood, either the governor or lieutenant governor of Michigan were New York natives:

Name	Arrival	Years in Office	Office
Thomas J Drake	1822	1841-42	Lt. Governor
William Greenly	1836	1846-47; 47-48	Lt. Gov./Gov.
Charles P Bush	1836	1847-48	Lt. Governor
William M Fenton	1836	1848-51	Lt. Governor
Calvin Britain	1827	1852-53	Lt. Governor

³ *Report of the Superintendent*, 16.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

Andrew Parsons	1835	1853; 53-55	Lt. Gov./Gov.
George Griswold	1835	1853-55	Lt. Governor
Kinsley S Bingham	1833	1855-59	Governor
George Coe	1837	1855-59	Lt. Governor
Moses Wisner	1837	1859-61	Governor
Austin Blair	1841	1861-65	Governor
Ebenezer O Grosvener	1837	1865-67	Lt. Governor
Morgan Bates	1833	1869-73	Lt. Governor
John J Bagley	1847	1873-77	Governor
Henry H Holt	1852	1873-77	Lt. Governor

Likewise, Wisconsin's executive leadership is filled with New York natives in the mid-nineteenth century.

Beyond their political power, New Yorkers on the move to the Midwest formed local communities and churches, built schools and established institutions of higher learning. They brought along their law books and the precedents they had learned in the east to help mould and shape these states of the upper Midwest.

Ethnic Migrants

In addition to the colonial and early-Federal period internal migrants who came from New York to the upper Midwest, bear in mind that from the mid-19th Century forward, substantial European immigration to North America saw many new arrivals landing at New York harbor. Like their hardy predecessors, these ethnic sorts came to both Michigan and Milwaukee in pursuit of jobs in factories and on farms, hoping to earn a better way of life. A simple example: many migrating Poles in the last third of the 19th Century first settled at Buffalo, in western New York. Within a generation, substantial numbers of them had moved to the Detroit and Milwaukee areas in pursuit of jobs. They took on back-breaking roles, requiring strong backs and strong wills. As the 20th Century dawned, many of these folks, joined by Blacks in their Great Migration northward from the South, moved into cities like Racine, Kenosha and Detroit. There they put down roots and established strongholds that shaped the cities, even today.

Both Wisconsin and Michigan, from their earliest establishment, are reflective of New York's influence. That influence continued well beyond the Civil War and helped these shape the identity and ethos of these daughters on the Great Lakes.