

# A Landmark Decision

*The residents speak French with a Walloon dialect. They live in brick farmhouses with wooden barns, eat chicken "booyah," and regularly attend Catholic churches. The first week of every July, they celebrate "Belgian Days." For almost a century and a half, they have been one of northeastern Wisconsin's cultural treasures.*

*And a year and a half ago they became a national treasure as well. On December 14, 1990, United States Secretary of the Interior Manuel Lujan approved the Namur Belgian-American Historical District in southern Door County as a national landmark. In announcing the decision, historian James Charleton of the National Park Service called the Namur site "the first and only Belgian-American District in the United States selected for the National Landmark Program and also one of a relatively few historic districts in a rural area."*

*The Landmark includes forty farmsteads, two cemeteries, and a church. It stretches from the hamlet of Namur in the Town of Union three miles north to the Town of Namur. It is one of fewer than two thousand National Landmarks in the U.S.*

*The National Landmark nomination was based on an earlier nomination to the National Register of Historic Places, written by Professor William H. Tishler, University of Wisconsin-Madison. The Register nomination was based, in turn, on the results of a nine-township reconnaissance survey undertaken by Tishler and Erik Brynildson, a UW colleague, along with Robert Florence and William Chaudoir of the Door County Planning Department.*

*The first excerpts printed below are from the landmark nomination form. They are followed by excerpts from the Register nomination.*

—Lawrence McAndrews

\*Door County Advocate, December 19, 1990.

## *Belgian Settlement in Door County Gains National Recognition*



*Courtesy Area Research Center, University of Wisconsin-Green Bay*

Women in the Belgian settlements of Northeast Wisconsin worked outside on washday when the weather was agreeable. Soft water was supplied by the rain barrel (on the right).

The Namur Historical District epitomizes the Belgian-American agricultural settlement area of northeastern Wisconsin, which is the nation's largest rural settlement of the nationality. Here "New Belgium took on the foreign look of Old Belgium."<sup>1</sup>

The most immediately manifest evidence of the Belgian presence . . . is the area's vernacular architecture . . . Traditional Walloon village and agricultural settlement patterns, with a church and related religious features as their nuclei, were transplanted to Wisconsin. Distinctive masonry building

traditions of Belgium were retained and adapted, while a large concentration of log buildings reflects the adaptation of American pioneer building materials and methods. [The district displays] an architectural expression that is exceptional in the rural American landscape.

### History

In 1853, the initial contingent of Belgian immigrants came to Wisconsin. This group of eight French-speaking Walloon families from Brabant Province settled in what was then virtually a wilderness in Brown County.

Subsequently, thousands of Belgian immigrants, primarily from Brabant and Namur Provinces, came to the area and the Walloon colony spread into neighboring Kewaunee and Door Counties. By 1860, the State's Belgian immigrants numbered nearly 5,000.<sup>2</sup>

Most Belgian immigrants had farmed in their homeland, and they brought their proven agrarian skills with them. In time, clusters of commercial, religious, and educational activities evolved into communities that served the surrounding agricultural economy. By the turn of the century, the Door County hamlet of Namur, near the northern edge of the main Belgian-American settlement zone, typical of these communities, contained an enclave of residences, a public school, a general store and saloon, a post office, and a church and parochial school.

Agriculture, as the established enterprise for the area, emphasized grain production, with some fruits and vegetables grown for home consumption. Over time, a more diversified system of farming evolved that specialized in

dairying. The farms averaged about 100 acres in size.<sup>3</sup>

Today, this activity remains the primary livelihood for the district's Belgian-American population. Following a trend throughout rural America, farming has declined somewhat in recent years, but the district has experienced relatively little intrusive subdivision or roadside strip commercial development and remains a remarkably attractive and unspoiled agricultural landscape.

With timber abundant in the area, the ubiquitous log cabin was the first shelter built by many Belgian immigrants.<sup>4</sup> Since brick and stone were the common building materials in their native Belgium, log construction was a new skill for most Belgian settlers. Thus, their log structures typically lacked the skilled refinements and tight joinery found among ethnic groups who came to America from a woodbuilding tradition.

Late in 1871, the great Peshtigo fire swept through much of the settlement. This conflagration destroyed many wood buildings and devastated the local timber

supply. Many residents had to rebuild. Also, in time, even those whose dwellings survived the fire outgrew their small initial shelters and erected more spacious homes.

While these new buildings sometimes incorporated log or frame construction, many of the new dwellings were built of red brick produced at area brickyards and on some local farms. These structures, like the stone houses also built by Belgian settlers in the region, reflected a preference for the masonry building tradition of their European homeland. Such log structures as survived were often covered with clapboard sheathing or a veneer of brick when their owners achieved some measure of prosperity.

## Architecture

With both indigenous limestone and brick-making clays available in abundance, Belgian settlers turned readily to traditional masonry construction. Irregular blocks of stone, quarried from stratified limestone surface deposits, were typically laid up in a generous bed of lime mortar to build handsome, enduring houses. Generally square, or nearly square in plan, their moderately pitched gable roofs were frame with unhewn cedar rafters nailed to square-hewn timber plates.

Floor plans and room arrangements varied and can be classified into three types: the square house plan, the gable wall entrance rectangular house plan, and the axial wall entrance rectangular house plan.

The gray to light-tan-colored thick rubble walls frequently incorporated irregular stone quoins at the corners. While little ornamentation was used, there is evidence that some houses had exterior walls that were given a thin surface coating of calcimine that has nearly disappeared over time.

Red brick remains the most distinctive and characteristic



*Courtesy Area Research Center, University of Wisconsin-Green Bay*

Buildings of the James Baudhuin farmstead can still be seen on Highway 57, facing south. The house was built in 1880 with limestone quarried on the farm. The stone summer kitchen and attached outdoor bake oven are the area's best examples of these characteristic Belgian features.

building material of Wisconsin's Belgian-Americans and is found throughout the district. Most of the large brick manufacturers in or near the area began operating in the 1880s,<sup>5</sup> although some limited production of brick occurred earlier on local farms. This date nearly coincides with the start of the region's brick house construction period.

The simple, well-proportioned traditional brick houses of the area generally conform to a rectangular, 1-1/2-story gable roof form. Their 8"-thick walls are fashioned of stretchers with many dwellings having headers about every sixth course. Some structures incorporate an underlying structure of logs covered with a single layer of stretcher course bricks—an unusual form of construction rarely found elsewhere in America.<sup>6</sup>

While floor plans vary, many conform to a "4 and 2" floor plan, consisting of four small rooms along one axial wall and two large rooms along the other, with one of

the latter used as the living room and the other as a kitchen/dining area.

Many incorporate a "bull's-eye" window just under the roof peak on the gable facing the road. Some houses were also adorned with cream-colored decorative bricks at the corners and/or around door and window openings. Woodfront porches were a common feature, but many have been removed over time.

The preference for building with brick has continued to the present day with the more recently built brick dwellings incorporating gambrel roofs and bungalow or even "ranch house" stylistic features.

Throughout the district, the massive limestone houses and well-proportioned red brick dwellings form the nucleus of farmsteads that include a variety of other structures. The most common of these agrarian buildings are the large wooden barns. They consist of three types: double-crib log threshing barns,

smaller single-crib log cattle barns, and timber-framed dairy barns.

The first of these were built during the 19th century for a grain-related economy and consist of two equal-size cribs of cedar logs separated by a central drive-through passage. Rectangular in size and built close to the ground, they typically have gable roofs and usually measure about 28' by 60'.

The second barn type, smaller in size, was built as a shelter for large livestock and consists of a single crib of chinked cedar logs. Later, many of the early grain barns were converted into cattle barns.

As barn-building technology changed, larger frame barns were constructed, and they constitute the third barn type in the area. Built on low stone foundations, they are larger and framed with heavy squared timbers covered with a sheathing of vertical boards. Early versions of this barn type incorporated a gable roof, but, at the end of the first decade of the 20th century, the new and more spacious gambrel roof became popular. Throughout the area, it was common for new buildings to be attached to existing structures, creating ells, or long, somewhat rambling, rectangular units.

A variety of additional smaller outbuildings can also be found on farmsteads in the district. The most distinctive of these include summer kitchens with attached outdoor bake ovens and wayside or votive chapels. Both reflect their counterparts in Belgium. The former are virtually identical in form and consist of two attached gable-roofed stone structures of unequal size, the smaller unit being the actual bake oven. The diminutive rectangular chapels, typically of frame construction, were sited close to the roads and used as places of prayer.

Other farmstead structures include granaries, woodsheds, small cattle and poultry sheds, garages, privies, corncribs, and silos. Almost all of these, except for some concrete silos, are built of wood. Frame construction was



*Arlene Derozier Photograph*

A superb example of the brick construction style typical of the Belgian district is situated on the north side of Highway 57 just east of Namur. Known as the Ralph Baudhuin farmstead, it was built by Margellin Baudhuin c. 1895. The names of eighteen family members are listed on a sign in front.



*Courtesy Area Research Center, University of Wisconsin-Green Bay*

Small wayside chapels, built by devout Catholics, are another feature that distinguishes the Namur Belgian-American Historical District. This one, dedicated to St. Jude Thaddeus, is located on the Elmer Delveaux farm.

typically used after the turn of the century, but many early granaries, woodsheds, and small cattle barns of logs can still be found on the farmsteads in the district.

To date, the most important preservation activity in the area has been the nine-township reconnaissance survey through which the Namur Historic District was identified. This nomination is based on the results of that survey. No other comprehensive historic preservation activity has been initiated in the district and the surrounding rural area.

Some independent preservation efforts, however, are noteworthy. The Peninsula Belgian-American Club has preserved two buildings in the district, including their headquarters building and a wayside chapel on their property at Namur. The former was an early frame dwelling that is now used as a social center, meeting hall, and small museum. The chapel, built in 1915, was moved to its present location from another site and has been meticulously maintained for public visitation.

Several years ago Heritage Hill State Park staff examined Belgian-

American buildings in the area and developed a Belgian-American farmstead at their outdoor museum in Green Bay. Included in this complex is a large log barn that was originally built in the district.

One other local preservation effort, where the owner of the Ralph Baudhuin Farmhouse has kept the dwelling in its pre-1900 condition, should be mentioned.

On the north side of Highway 57 just east of Namur, this farmstead has as its nucleus a handsome front gable 1-1/2-story red brick house. Built c. 1895 by Margellin Baudhuin<sup>7</sup>, the dwelling has a front porch, central door, and five windows arranged symmetrically in the front gable wall. At the gable peak can be found a distinctive "bull's-eye" window. To the rear, an unobtrusive summer kitchen has been built. The house has not been altered and is a good example of the size and form of early Belgian-American brick houses found in the area. The house and five outbuildings behind it are arranged around a loosely enclosed farmyard. The associated buildings consist of a log garage, two attached frame barns, a

small frame shed, and a non-contributing concrete block garage.

*[The following excerpts are from the earlier nomination of the Namur Belgian-American District to the National Register of Historic Places.]*

### **Ethnic Significance**

The importance of immigration in the settlement of the United States is a widely accepted phenomenon and has long been recognized in the work of historians, geographers and others. A massive influx of European immigrants was especially important in populating the growing state of Wisconsin. As noted in the state's cultural resource management plan, "Wisconsin actively encouraged new settlement, both foreign and native-born"<sup>8</sup> and as a result "between 1850 and 1890, Wisconsin's foreign-born population increased five-fold."<sup>9</sup>

Wisconsin historian Richard Nelson Current noted this large proportion of immigrants when he wrote: "The 1860 census showed that Wisconsin, in proportion to its population, contained more immigrants than any other state except California",<sup>10</sup> and that of all the states, "Wisconsin in 1870, with about the same proportion of immigrants (over 34 per cent) as ten years earlier, still contained proportionally the largest number of the foreign-born except for California, Nevada and Minnesota."<sup>11</sup> Thus, he noted, "for many years Wisconsin was something of a living ethnological museum . . . the natural result of immigration from a variety of countries, settlement largely in homogeneous groups, and attachment to inherited ways of doing things."<sup>12</sup> While not one of the state's largest ethnic groups, Wisconsin's Belgians, nonetheless, ". . . formed the largest rural settlement of their nationality in the United States."<sup>13</sup>

The Belgian-American settlement of northeastern Wisconsin, epitomized by the Namur Belgian-

American Rural Historic District, has been clearly viewed as an ethnically separate entity both by the residents themselves and by Wisconsinites from the surrounding area. Few, if any, other ethnic enclaves in the state have survived with both the size and homogeneity of the Belgians. While Belgians settled in other parts of America, this region retains, to date, the nation's largest known concentration of rural buildings relating to this ethnic group, and has perhaps the purest retention of other distinctive cultural features from the Walloon region of that country.

### Period of Significance

The period of significance for this nomination is 1880-1930. This time period covers the era during which buildings were built that reflect the history, character and purpose of the district.

### Boundary

#### Description/Justification

Starting from the northeast corner of the district located in Gardner Township at a point 1320' north of County Highway K and 1320' west of Brussels Road, the eastern boundary runs due south into Union Township to a point 1320' south of Highway 57. From this point, the southern boundary runs due west to St. Mary's of the Snow's parish cemetery, meanders around the south side of the cemetery to include it in the district, and then continues running due west to the district's southwest corner located at the edge of Belgian Drive at a point 1320' south of Bay Shore Road. The western boundary then runs north to County Highway N, then east 1320' to the intersection with Ledge Road, then north 2640', then north to the waters of Green Bay, then northeast along the water's edge to the northeast edge of the Harold Euclide property. The north boundary then runs southeast to County Highway N,

then northeast along N to a point 1320' due north of County Highway K, then due east to the point of beginning.

Approximate boundaries for the district were selected after a careful analysis of the integrity and location of nearly 500 sites documented during the nine-township Belgian-American settlement area reconnaissance survey. Specific boundary locations were then established after intensive on-site inspections of the area to determine the most suitable district edges. The northern boundary was located at the most northerly extension of the best concentration of contributing architectural features. Immediately beyond this northern edge there is considerable open farm land, and the number of contributing buildings diminishes substantially. Much of the eastern boundary runs along high ground that provides a natural visual buffer for defining this side of the district. There is considerable non-contributing, new development to the east of this boundary. The south edge was selected to, in general, parallel Highway 57, and also to define the limits of the best concentration of contributing

buildings in this vicinity. The western boundary was established to include the westernmost extension of the area's rural character and architectural integrity. It also adjoins several woodlots that act as a natural buffer for the district. Extending this edge further west would have included a zone of recently-built, non-contributing seasonal home development on property near or adjacent to the Green Bay shoreline. While the northernmost portion of the western boundary does include a short length of Green Bay shoreline in Gardner Township, the land here is wooded and relatively undeveloped.

### Archeological Potential

Because the district has not been systematically surveyed for archeological resources, its archeological potential is essentially undefined. However, selected areas to the west, adjacent to the water of Green Bay, have been examined by the Great Lakes Archeological Research Center. This survey included a few acres extending into the district in the NW of the SE of Section 10.<sup>14</sup>



*Courtesy Area Research Center, University of Wisconsin-Green Bay*

One of the Belgian district traditions was to take a lunch break each morning and afternoon, making a total of five meals a day.

The State Archeologist's inventory lists two sites within the district. The first, a habitation-worksite, is located in Section 1 of the Union Township. The second refers to Indian burials unearthed in 1901 in Section 11 of Union Township.<sup>15</sup>

#### NOTES

1. Fred L. Holmes, *Old World Wisconsin* (Eau Claire: E.M. Hale and Co., 1944), p. 163.
2. Francoise Lempereur, *Les Walloons d'Amerique du Nord* (Gembloux, Belgium: Editions J. Duculot, 1976), p. 12.
3. Tishler, William H., and Erik

Brynildson, *The Architecture and Landscape Characteristics of Rural Belgian Settlement in Northeastern Wisconsin* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1986), p. 33.

4. See, for example, Francoise Lempereur, "The Walloon Settlement of North-East Wisconsin," *Belgians in the United States* (Brussels, Belgium: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1976), p. 75.

5. Consult Ernest Robertson Buckley, *The Clays and Clay Industries of Wisconsin* (Madison: Wisconsin Geological and Natural History Survey, 1989), for a discussion of brickyards in the region.

6. Charles F. Calkins and William G. Laatsch, "Belgians," *America's Architectural Roots: Ethnic Groups That Built America*, Del Upton, ed. (Washington: The Preservation Press, 1986), pp. 9, 100.

7. John Kahlert and Albert Quinlin, *Early Door County Buildings and The People Who Built Them, 1849-1910* (Baileys Harbor, Wisconsin: Meadow Lane Publishers, 1976), p. 58.

8. Historic Preservation Division, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, *Cultural Resource Management in Wisconsin*, Vol. 1 (Madison: State Historical Society), pp. 1-2.

9. *Ibid.*

10. Richard Nelson Current, *Wisconsin: A Bicentennial History* (New York: W.W. Norton Company, Inc., 1977), p. 36.

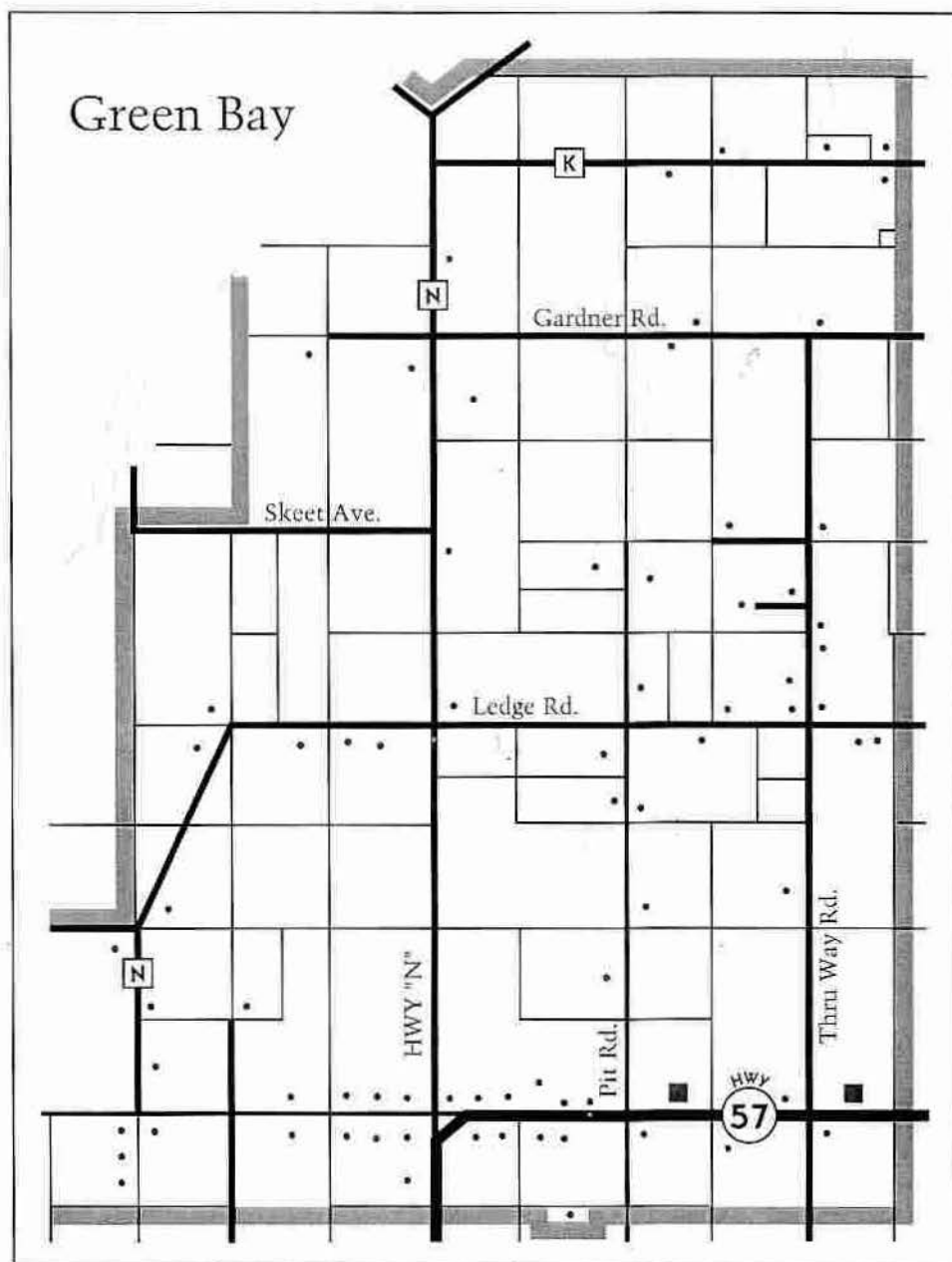
11. Richard N. Current, *The History of Wisconsin: Volume II. The Civil War Era, 1848-1873* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1976), pp. 415-416.

12. Current, *Bicentennial History*, p. 56.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

14. David F. Overstreet, *Archeological Survey of the Green Bay Coastal Corridor* (Waukesha: Great Lakes Archeological Research Center, Inc., 1980).

15. See survey card code numbers DR-40 and 47-DR-140, on file with the State Archeologist at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.



Sudarāt Nid Harnvorakiat Illustration

In this map of the Belgian-American National Landmark District, historically significant features are indicated with dots and squares, the squares represent two sights along the well-traveled Highway 57: the stone James Baudhuin farmstead to the west and the brick Ralph Baudhuin farmstead to the east.