

Now & Then in Ripon ... Looking back with the Ripon Historical Society

Ripon newspaper owner/author became Wis. governor

George W. Peck (1840-1916) moved to Wisconsin from New York in 1843 with his family to what now is known as Cold Spring. It is located north of Whitewater in Jefferson County.

Peck attended public school until age 15, when he left to become an apprentice in the printing trade. Then at age 20, he married Francena Rowley (1843-1906) of Delavan, Wis. In 1860, he took a job in the newspaper business in Janesville, Wis. He and his wife had two sons.

Peck joined the Civil War in 1863 as a private-rank Union soldier in the 4th Wisconsin Volunteer Cavalry Regiment. This cavalry unit consisted of multiple military groups, including the "Ripon Rifles" from Ripon that were eventually combined into one regiment and then relocated and headquartered in Racine.

Over time, this cavalry unit recruited 1,047 officers and men to fight in the Civil War. Later, an additional 998 men were recruited as replacements, making a total of 2,045 enlistees. They suffered 431 fatalities, including officers and soldiers that were killed or contracted diseases.

Peck was taken prisoner in 1866 and held at Libby Prison in Richmond, Va. It was after Peck was released in a prisoner-exchange between the Confederate and Union armies that he was appointed to the U.S. Military Academy by President Abraham Lincoln. There, he was promoted to the rank of 2nd lieutenant.

The 4th Wisconsin Volunteer Cavalry mustered out and disbanded in 1866 after the end of the Civil War in 1865, ending Peck's military service.

Excelling in journalism, from 1866-1868 Peck became the foreman and half-owner of the *Whitewater Republican* newspaper. He also completed work for the *Wisconsin State Journal*, and was simultaneously the New York correspondent for the *La Crosse Democrat* until 1871.

Simultaneously, while living in Ripon in 1867, Peck became

city treasurer and the owner of *The Ripon Representative*, an independent newspaper.

Unafraid of controversy, his goal was to publish political news that was relevant to the times.

Peck changed his Ripon newspaper's editorial content to become more Democratic.

After selling the business, that newspaper later became *The Prairie City Record* and was absorbed into *The Ripon Free Press*, the forerunner of the *Ripon Weekly Press*.

It was during this time that Peck also started creating political cartoons. Newspapers across America were using cartoons to illustrate notable people and depict mockeries of important events, such as government and legislative decisions. The primary goal for newspaper cartoons were to both inform and educate the general public while at the same time influence readers' points-of-view. Peck's cartoons grew in popularity, making them memorable.

During this time, what today is known as "The Little White Schoolhouse," the one-room school (now a historic museum located at 1074 West Fond du Lac St.) where Riponites founded the Republican Party, was sold to become a private residence from 1860-1908.

The building was physically moved to the corner of Houston and Fond du Lac streets.

The former schoolhouse became Peck's residence. A side-door was added with porch cover, and this same type of porch covers also was added above the original front door of the building.

Later, the Little White Schoolhouse was moved to the Ripon College campus as a shrine to The Birthplace of the Republican Party and the makeshift porches plus extra door was removed.

In 1874, following a trip to New York City, Peck decided to expand his newspaper holdings.

Upon returning to Wisconsin, he created *The Sun* newspaper in La Crosse in 1879. Based on *The Sun*'s success, Peck expanded this newspaper into Milwaukee and changed the title to *Peck's Sun* newspaper, giving him a much larger platform and even more subscribers to read his political content and humorous cartoons.

Peck's Sun became the largest circulating newspaper of its type and it later gave him a venue to



George W. Peck



THE LITTLE WHITE Schoolhouse, which is the birthplace of the Republican Party, served as a private house from 1860-1908 and was lived in by Democrat George W. Peck. *submitted photo*

start featuring stories he authored titled "Peck's Bad Boy."

Peck's Bad Boy was modeled after street-wise children who committed delinquent and unruly acts only to become reprimanded and held accountable for their bad deeds. For example, a bad boy would be thrown out of a drug store for stealing candy or playing pranks on the pharmacist. Or a bad boy would be in trouble at home and punished by an authoritative parent or guardian. At the end of each chapter or story, a moral and lesson was learned.

As these stories gained popularity, Peck's writings became a series of best-selling books sold nationwide. The stories were so popular in the early 1900s they became scripts for Hollywood movies starring James Cagney as the roughhouse "bad boy" who was mischievous and always causing trouble.

"Peck's Bad Boy" series of books can sometimes be found used and for sale online.

They include the following titles and publishing dates:

► Peck's Fun, 1879

► Peck's Sunshine, 1882

► Peck's Bad Boy & His Pa, 1883

► Peck's Bad Boy and the Groceryman, 1883

► Peck's Irish Friend Phelan Geoheagan, 1887

► Peck's Uncle Ike & The Redheaded Boy, 1899

► Peck's Bad Boy Abroad, 1904,

► Peck's Bad Boy with the Circus, 1905

► Peck's Bad Boy with the Cowboys, 1907

► Peck's Bad Boy in an Airship, 1908

In between writing the above series, Peck also authored two books, titled "Will he Marry Her," an 1885 domestic drama, and "How Private George W. Peck Put Down the Rebellion," an account of his comical experiences of a new soldier recruit in 1887.

In 1890, Peck was elected the ninth mayor of Milwaukee.

Wisconsin Democratic leaders took notice of him as mayor and less than seven months later chose him as their candidate for governor. Upon winning the latter

election and becoming the state's 17th governor, he resigned as mayor of Milwaukee and served two terms from 1891-1895. He ran for the governor's office twice more following his first two terms and was defeated in those subsequent elections.

While governor, his administration was credited with returning a half-million-dollars to the people of Wisconsin by repealing tax laws that Peck uncovered that funded excessive government spending.

Peck died in 1916 at the age of 75 of Bright's Disease, an inflammation of the kidneys. His wife Francena had passed away 10 years earlier in 1906 at the age of 63 in Oak Park, Ill.

Both are buried in Forest Home Cemetery in Milwaukee.

The Ripon Historical Society is the oldest continually operating historical society in Wisconsin. It is open Fridays and Saturdays 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

For more information follow us at Facebook/riponhistory or www.riponhistory.org.



A YOUNG George W. Peck pictured while serving in the Wisconsin Cavalry during the Civil War. *submitted photo*

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