

# Building Site Excavation Exposed History

## *Tales of Earlier Days*

By Bob Dewel

On October 20, 1921, a Baraboo newspaper reporter wrote as follows: "In preparing the grounds for the new Trimpey art studio...the old brick portion of the Haugen place has been torn down. The old brick structure was built probably in the 1840's, and served as the first court house of Sauk County." The location was 128 Fourth Avenue.

Well, the reporter was partially right, but there is much more to the story. To begin with, Baraboo was not the first Sauk County seat. That honor was given to Prairie du Sac in 1845, before Wisconsin was a state, by the provisional legislature. This followed a contest between Prairie du Sac and Sauk City as to which could offer the best political deal.

Prairie du Sac appeared to make the best offer and was awarded the prize only to have its offer exposed as misleading or worse. In Nov. 1845 A disgusted area cadre, perhaps self-appointed, searched the otherwise virtually unsettled county. They selected the small river dam settlement we now know as Baraboo as the designated location for the county seat.

In the following decade, and particularly in 1852, the tiny settlement of Reedsburg connived without success to capture the position as county seat. Actually, County Seat locations were political footballs in those heady days, and the Baraboo award was far from secure. Locally a courthouse square was platted, apparently in 1847. Facing lots were sold for a scattering of businesses, but more was needed to ensure the retention of the county seat prize, still hotly sought by Reedsburg.

Early historians speak vaguely of a square wood frame structure, "like a dry goods box", said to have been constructed and placed first on a corner of the square. It was from this princely structure that Baraboo's founder, Abe Wood, escaped jail by simply digging out, there being no foundation. Sometime in the late 1840's this was moved to somewhere in the neighborhood of the alley behind what in 1922 became the Trimpey property.

There are unconfirmed rumors of fires, and apparently a brick addition was added to provide some protection for the papers of the new county. Both the wood frame and the brick addition were abandoned with the construction of a two story red brick courthouse in the center of the courthouse park in 1856. This concludes a thumb-nail sketch of perhaps a dozen articles by this author to be found in "Sauk County and Baraboo", Dewel, Volume I at most Libraries or Historical Societies in the county.

Downtown researcher Joe Ward lists in detail the dozen or so owners of this property from the 1850's to Trimpey in 1922. It appears that the brick section and perhaps even some of the frame structure survived in various forms as an ugly duckling misfit next

to the sparkling Al Ringling Theatre. Al. wanted the old frame building and the one Trimpey later bought included at the time he built the theatre in 1915. Had they sold to Al, three bays to the East of the marquee would match those which went west, presenting a magnificent façade!

As Baraboo lowered the level of Fourth Avenue to that of the other streets on the square, the old box-like store remained high and dry, with a makeshift set of steps, as seen in the picture. The eyesore remained for 20 years, until Henry Ringling Jr. finally purchased and partially demolished it in 1937. Even at that late date it is said that some remnants of the old brick addition were found and removed.

Historian Ward lists dozens of occupants of this old courthouse area, including at one time the Baraboo Republic, a predecessor of this newspaper.



Sauk County Historical Society

A Nineteenth century shack adjacent to a Twentieth century marble palace. If the owner and his neighbor to the east had agreed to sell to Al. Ringling in 1915, the theatre façade would have been much wider and grander. The building was finally removed in 1937. Its replacement now serves as the ticket office and reception for the Theatre.