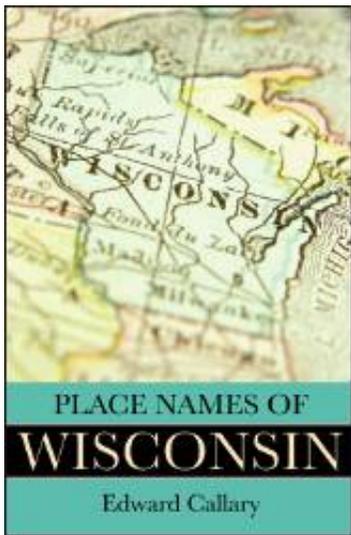# A story of acceptance

Wisconsin communities named for a diverse set of places, people

By Anna Marie Lux
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As far as we know, Benjamin Edgerton lived a good life.

But when prominent citizen Charles H. Dickinson named a Rock County community after him, Edgerton wasn't so sure.

The chief surveyor for the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railroad reportedly told Dickinson to wait until he was dead before naming a fledgling community after him.

"I might do something in the meantime to discredit the name," he explained.

Dickinson disregarded the caution and, in July 1854, established a post office at a place he called Edgerton. Edward Callary, professor emeritus of linguistics at Northern Illinois University, shares the story with a smile. No one can say for sure how many place names are in Wisconsin.

One reliable source estimates more than 40,000.

But the high number didn't scare Callary.

Nor was he deterred by Wisconsinites calling him a flatlander.

Callary spent three years reading early county histories, historical letters and diaries, often at the Wisconsin Historical Society, to research the places we call home.

Last year, the University of Wisconsin Press published his 327-page book, "Place Names of Wisconsin."

Callary's research offers insight into the naming of more than 2,000 of the familiar and notso-familiar communities that dot our landscape, including many in Rock and Walworth counties.

They got their names in many different ways.

Often, immigrants christened cities after their homes in Europe, which is why Wisconsin has places named Paris, Berlin and Stockholm.

"Immigrants wanted to maintain some connection with the old country," Callary said. "What better way to do that than to name their new home the same as their old home. You can find almost all of Europe in Wisconsin."

Variety makes Wisconsin place names stand out from other states.

"Wisconsin tends to be more open to names from many different sources," Callary said. "They tell a story of acceptance that is not found in all areas."

Native Americans were the first to leave their names on the land, but in a roundabout way. Europeans often took Native American words and altered them in spelling or pronunciation to name places, Callary explained.

Koshkonong is a good example. The word is first recorded about 1820 as the name of a Winnebago village on the Rock River. Early spellings include "Kus-kou-o-nog," "Goosh-we-hawn" and "Coshconong."

James Duane Doty first used the current spelling in the mid-1840s. But the name's origins can be traced to the Ojibwa "kackawanung," which means "where there is heavy fog."

Other names, such as the town of Bradford in Rock County, came from New England. William C. Chase arrived in the area in 1836 and named it after his birthplace in Bradford, Vermont.

Some places were named after famous people.

Samuel and Henry Phoenix from Perry, New York, founded Delavan in 1836 as a colony dedicated to temperance, religion and the abolition of slavery, Callary explained.

Samuel Phoenix personally lobbied the Wisconsin Territorial Legislature to name the

community Delavan in honor of Edward C. Delavan of New York, who was a founder of the American Temperance Union in 1836.

Some places have more than one account explaining how they were christened.

Beloit is one of them.

"It's a great name because of how it was created," Callary said.

Maj. Charles Johnson figures prominently in both explanations.

In the first, Callary said Johnson liked the name Detroit and wanted something similar when the city was named in the fall of 1837. He experimented with changes such as "Betroit" but settled on Beloit.

In another account, Johnson provided the model, but the name was chosen by Lucius Fisher, who never missed a chance to take credit for coining Beloit, Callary explained.

In his book, Callary quotes Fisher, who said: "(After a committee had been appointed) we proposed several names and finally agreed to place the alphabet in a hat and see if we could not get a combination of letters that would give us a name…"

While doing this, Johnson sounded out the French word "belloeit" meaning "pretty" and pronounced it "Belotte." Afterward, Fisher said "Beloit," like "Detroit."

The naming of Janesville is more straightforward, Callary said.

The city grew around a tavern and a ferry operated by Henry F. Janes from about 1837.

In the 1872 "Wisconsin Historical Collections," Janes explained that he named the city Black Hawk because the site was one of the warrior's camping grounds. But the Post Office Department said the name already was taken and called the new post office Janesville.

Callary said knowing the origins of place names helps people be proud of their communities.

"The place names of Wisconsin provide glimpses into the lives of its citizens," he explained. "They also offer glimpses into their origins, histories and records of their concerns, their hopes, their ambitions and their legacies to 21st-century Wisconsinites."