

The Pre-Plank Intellectuals of Sheboygan Falls

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When one thinks of Sheboygan Falls in the early 1840s, one naturally conjures black and white images of pioneer log cabins, the town's primitive mill, and settlers trading with Native American tribes. One pictures a time when work commanded nearly every daylight hour and many of the nights. One imagines the many hardships that followed the tiny trails that connected the village to the rest of the world. Of course, such images are quite accurate. These were very rugged times, lived in the most primitive of conditions, and far from the conveniences we now take for granted. Nevertheless, few would imagine that Sheboygan Falls was then home to a vibrant intellectual community.

Prominent among the young intellectuals was Horace Rublee and his sister Emeline, both of whom also are numbered among the town's first schoolteachers. Horace and Emeline came from Vermont in 1840 with their mother Martha. Their father Alva had arrived in 1839, and he managed William Farnsworth's sawmill. As both Horace and Emeline would later relate,¹ the wilderness town at that time was primarily a community of young people, mostly from New England, with strong intellectual interests.

Indeed, during the winters, the settlers held a weekly debating society, which opened with someone reciting an original essay or poem. Though books at first were hard to come by, the settlers strove to have more sent and they shared them openly with each other. Early titles read and discussed in literary meetings included Scott's *Lady on the Lake*, Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, Goethe's *Faust*, in addition to works by Byron, Milton, and Shakespeare. One of the most influential books consumed by the village was Combe's *On the Constitution of Man*, which combined evolutionary ideas with moral philosophy and neuroanatomy. Today these ideas are associated with phrenology.

This was a very progressive town. Nearly everyone read the *New York Tribune*, then edited by Horace Greeley. Greeley, and others whose works they read, inspired a strong interest in creating a utopian society based on the social movement known as "Fourierism." Fourierism was a socialist philosophy of reform based on the ideas of the French theorist Charles Fourier that aimed to transform society into self-sufficient and independent communities. The philosophy inspired the famous Brook Farm experiment of West Roxbury, Massachusetts, a communal society founded by Unitarian minister, George Ripley. Also informing the Brook Farm was the principle of transcendentalism, a religious and cultural philosophy that aimed to reward equal shares for equal distribution of chores, thus providing additional time to all for intellectual and scientific endeavors.²

Horace Rublee circa 1855



Many in Sheboygan Falls adopted these principles and attempted to apply them to their new society. As Emeline Rublee noted, the movement "broke out with a good deal of virulence right here in those primitive days."³

The experiment was short lived. Not only did the Brook Farm fail as a social experiment, Sheboygan Falls underwent a tremendous amount of change, especially when the first major wave of European settlers came. Before their arrival, Sheboygan Falls was much more populated than Sheboygan, which was merely a stopping point for logging ships taking their timbers south. As Emeline put it, Sheboygan, or "The Mouth" as they called it then, was considered "the duller and more conservative region (of Sheboygan County)... Little intellectual stimulus was found there..."⁴ All this changed with the European

Emeline Rublee circa 1855



newcomers. Horace Rublee left Sheboygan Falls for Madison shortly after 1850 and he quickly became the co-editor and owner of the town's political paper, *The Argus*. Eventually he would become the State Librarian of Wisconsin, editor of the *Madison State Journal*, Minister to Switzerland under the Grant administration, editor of the *Boston Advertiser*, and the editor and owner of the Milwaukee *Sentinel* until his death in 1896. His two sons would become major players in national and international politics. Emeline Rublee married George T. Cole, another prominent early settler. Her children too became important figures in law and education.⁵ The early reminiscences of Horace and Emeline Rublee help us to see the lives of Sheboygan Falls' first settlers in greater depth and color. They remind us that among the farmers and fellers of trees were intellectuals, eager to participate in the great social experiment of early Wisconsin, and surprisingly self-aware of their roles in making history.

¹ Emeline wrote a paper about her early experiences that her brother Horace read before the Pioneer Society at Sheboygan Falls on February 22, 1894. It was published again as "Mr. Rublee's Reminiscences," *Sheboygan County Historical Review* 2/1 (1910), pp. 5-7. The photographs here of Horace and Emeline are found therein. The same issue contains reminiscences of Emeline Rublee as related to a friend, Mrs. Otto Gaffron. Both of the reminiscences were read before the G. G. G.'s, a women's club at Plymouth on October 26, 1909. The intellectual nature of Sheboygan Falls continued to fascinate its residents for many years, as seen by the numerous times the reminiscences were republished. See, e.g., the *Sheboygan Press*, February 14, 1914, April 17, 1916, and Horace Rublee's "Reminiscences of Sheboygan Falls," written in 1857, which appeared again in the *Sheboygan Press*, April 23, 1926. In turn, these were republished with some variations in the *Sheboygan Press*, April 29, 1927, August 25, 1934, and March 16, 1939.

² Among the founders of the Brook Farm was novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne.

³ "Mr. Rublee's Reminiscences," p. 6.

⁴ "Mr. Rublee's Reminiscences," p. 6.

⁵ I intend to write in greater depth about the Rublee family and their descendants for an upcoming edition of *The Researcher*, as the family is not represented in Janice Hildebrand's, *They Were First* (Sheboygan Falls, WI.: SCHRC, 2003).