

The Impact of Belgian Immigration in Wisconsin

Belgian immigrants in the 1800s brought many unique traditions with them that have permanently shaped the cultural landscape of Wisconsin in the 21st century, while enduring many hardships and contributing heavily to the state's farming industry.

This map highlights three significant decades relating to the immigration of Belgian people to Wisconsin and traces main Belgian settlements and ancestors into the 21st century in Northeastern Wisconsin, which boasts the highest percentage of individuals with Belgian ancestry in the nation. By looking ahead, it becomes clear that the dense Belgian population that began to grow in this small part of the state during the 1800s has still remained in the same area for many decades.

Riverview

Spruce

Lena

Stiles

Abrams

Chase

Pittsfield

Green Bay

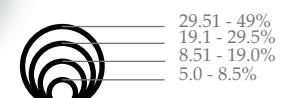
Hobart

Wrightstown

Denmark

Kaukauna

% of Population with
Belgian Ancestry
in 2000 Census



"Where resounds the Belgian tongue, where Belgian hymns and songs are sung,
This is the land, the land of lands, where vows bind less than clasped hands."

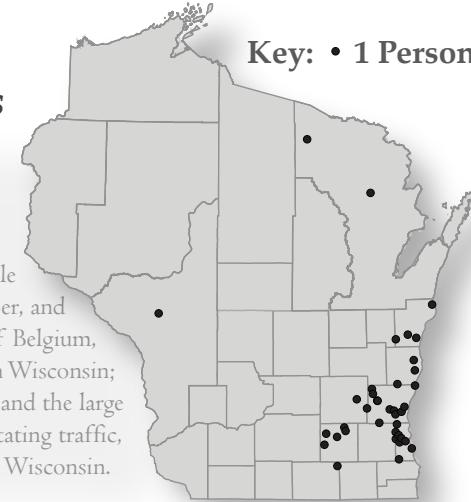
By: McKenzie Maccaux

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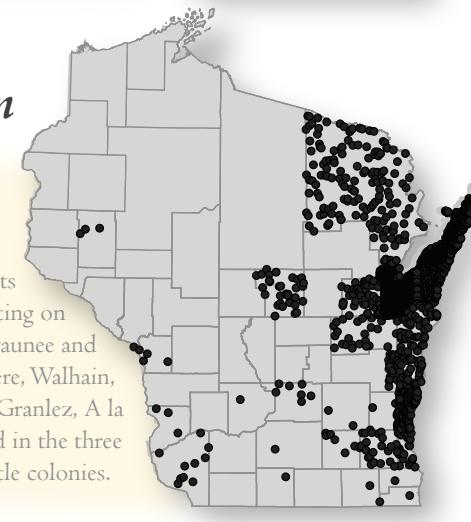
1850: New Beginnings

Shortly after Wisconsin became a state in 1848, the first wave of Belgian immigrants arrived and began to establish their own settlements. For these immigrants, Wisconsin was the most suitable place to settle on account of its land, water, timber, and its climate, which was nearly the same as that of Belgium, with the exception that the winters are longer in Wisconsin; but considering the purity of its atmosphere, and the large volume of snowfall during the winter months, facilitating traffic, the conditions were thought to be favorable in Wisconsin.



1860: Rapid Expansion

While the 1850 U.S. Census lists only 45 persons of Belgian nativity in the state, by 1860 that number had dramatically increased to 4,647. In 1854-55, a large stream of Belgian immigrants followed the trail of those pioneers and, locating on Government land in the counties of Brown, Kewaunee and Door, formed other settlements such as; Rosiere, Walhain, L'Union, Brussels, Thiry Daems, Aux Flamand, Granlez, A la Petite Baie. Everywhere that they could find land in the three counties, the Belgians founded their little colonies.



1880: Peak of Immigration

In 1880, the number of Belgian immigrants in Wisconsin peaked at 5,167. These first Belgian settlers made a living making shingles and farming small plots of land. This changed in the fall of 1871 when the Peshtigo fire swept through Belgian settlements and virtually destroyed the shingle industry. After the fire, farming became the major industry, but because the farms were small, income was often supplemented in the winter by commercial fishing.

