

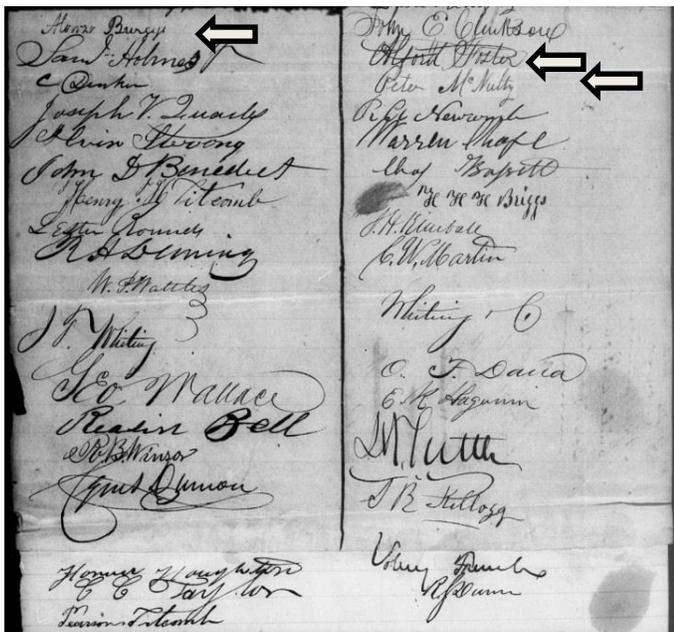
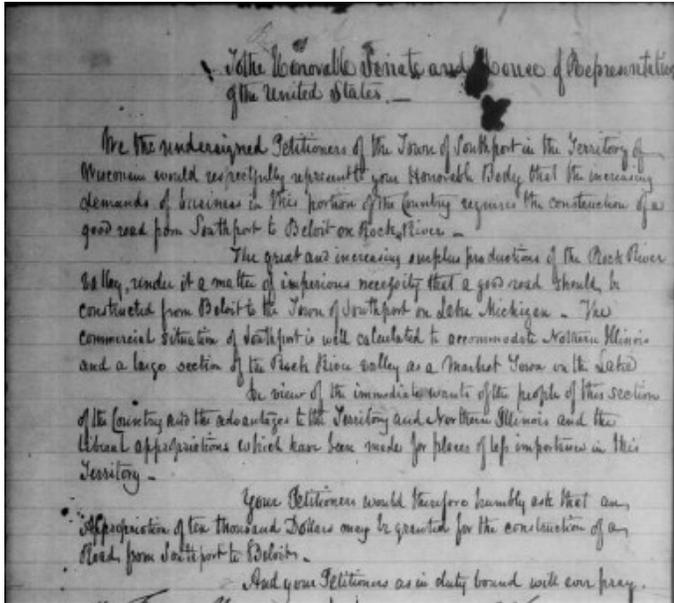
# Our Family News Letter

Issue 132

Greendale, Wisconsin

March 2026

## Old Document Found From Early Wisconsin Territory



I used AI (Artificial Intelligence) to read and transcribe a document hand written before 1849.

This is a historical document, specifically a petition from the residents of Southport (now Kenosha), Wisconsin Territory, to the U.S. Congress in the mid-1800s.

Here is the transcription of the handwritten text:

To the Honorable Senate and House of Representatives of the United States. —

We the undersigned Petitioners of the Town of Southport in the Territory of Wisconsin would respectfully represent to your Honorable Body that the increasing demands of business in this portion of the Country requires the construction of a good road from Southport to Beloit on Rock River —

The great and increasing surplus productions of the Rock River Valley, render it a matter of imperious necessity that a good road should be constructed from Beloit to the Town of Southport on Lake Michigan — The Commercial situation of Southport is well calculated to accommodate Northern Illinois and a large section of the Rock River Valley as a Market Town on the Lake.

In view of the immediate wants of the people of this section of the Country and the advantages to the Territory and Northern Illinois and the liberal appropriations which have been made for places of less importance in this Territory —

Your Petitioners would therefore humbly ask that an Appropriation of ten thousand Dollars may be granted for the construction of a Road from Southport to Beloit.

And your Petitioners as in duty bound will ever pray.

Note: This document was signed by 32 men. Included are Alonzo Burgess, Alfred Foster, and Peter McNulty. These three are shown next to the following arrows. ←

Alonzo Burgess was a brother of Patience Burgess, the wife of Peter McNulty. Alfred Foster was the father of Amanda Foster, the second wife of Benjamin Burgess. Benjamin Burgess was the father of Alonzo Burgess and Patience Burgess by his first wife, Rebecca Chase. Amanda Foster was the step mother of Alonzo and Patience.

### What was the date of the petition to Congress?

Alfred Foster was born on July 5, 1774 in Massachusetts and died on **March 7, 1849** at Southport, now Kenosha, Wisconsin. Alonzo Burgess was born at East Bennington, Bennington County, Vermont on August 27, 1820 and died in Racine, Wisconsin on February 28, 1902. Peter McNulty was born in Ireland in 1897 and died in Racine or Kenosha County in about 1884.

Based on the death date for Alfred Foster, the petition was created before **March 7, 1849**, and likely in 1848.

Wisconsin's journey from a frontier wilderness to a settled state was marked by two significant milestones in the mid-19th century: its organization as a territory and its eventual admission to the Union.

### Key Dates in Wisconsin History

- **Wisconsin Territory Formed:** The act of Congress creating the territory was signed on April 20, 1836, and it officially became a separate political entity on **July 3, 1836**.

**Wisconsin Statehood:** Wisconsin was admitted as the 30th state in the Union on **May 29, 1848**.

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### The Wisconsin Territory (1836–1848)

Before becoming its own territory, the land that is now Wisconsin was shuffled through several different jurisdictions. It was part of the Northwest Territory (1787), then the Indiana Territory (1800), the Illinois Territory (1809), and finally the Michigan Territory (1818).

When the Wisconsin Territory was first established in 1836, it was much larger than the modern state. It originally included all of present-day **Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Iowa**, as well as parts of North and South Dakota.

**First Capital:** Belmont (for a brief session in late 1836).

**Permanent Capital:** Madison (selected in late 1836, though the government moved there in 1838).

**First Governor:** Henry Dodge, appointed by President Andrew Jackson.

### The Path to Statehood

The transition to statehood took twelve years. The population grew rapidly during this time, largely due to a "lead rush" in the southwestern part of the territory and an influx of settlers from New England and New York.

The process was delayed by several factors:

1. **Voter Hesitation:** Residents initially rejected statehood proposals four times (1842, 1843, 1844, and 1845), fearing that the move would lead to higher taxes.
2. **Constitutional Debates:** The first proposed state constitution in 1846 was rejected by voters because it contained controversial provisions, such as banning commercial banking and granting property rights to married women.

3. **Final Approval:** A second, more moderate constitution was drafted and approved in early 1848, clearing the way for President James K. Polk to sign the statehood bill on May 29, 1848.

The road connecting **Southport** (now Kenosha) to **Beloit** was one of Wisconsin's earliest and most vital territorial thoroughfares.

The primary road connecting these two settlements was established as a **territorial road** in the late 1830s, specifically around **1837–1839**.

### 1. The Territorial Road (The 1830s)

Shortly after the Wisconsin Territory was formed in 1836, the legislature authorized several "territorial roads" to connect the growing ports on Lake Michigan with the inland agricultural and mining regions.

**Authorization:** In **1837**, a surveying party was sent from Racine (which Southport was then a part of) to lay out a road toward the Mississippi River.

**The Route:** This road initially connected **Southport to Janesville**, with a southern branch or extension reaching **Beloit**. This was a crude dirt track, often impassable during the spring thaw or heavy rains.

### 2. The Plank Road Era (The 1840s & 1850s)

As the population boomed, the dirt roads were insufficient for heavy wheat wagons. In the late 1840s and early 1850s, private companies were chartered to build "plank roads"—highways made of thick wooden boards.

**Southport & Beloit Plank Road:** The territorial legislature chartered the **Southport and Beloit Plank Road Company** in **1848**.

**Purpose:** The goal was to provide a "hard, smooth, and even surface" for

farmers to haul produce to the Southport harbor.

**The Outcome:** While portions were built (notably the section from Kenosha toward the Fox River), the full plank road all the way to Beloit was never entirely finished as originally envisioned. The rapid arrival of **railroads** in the early 1850s made the expensive upkeep of wooden roads obsolete.

### 3. The Modern Route

If you were to follow that historical path today, much of it corresponds to **Wisconsin Highway 50** (which heads west from Kenosha) and **Highway 11** or **Highway 81**, which eventually lead into the Beloit area.

When did Southport become Kenosha? Southport was officially re-named **Kenosha** in **1850**.

The name change occurred as part of a significant shift in the community's status: on **February 8, 1850**, the Wisconsin State Legislature approved a charter that incorporated the settlement as a city and simultaneously separated it from Racine County to form its own county (Kenosha County).

### The Evolution of the Name

The city went through several names in a very short period as it transitioned from a tiny pioneer outpost to a bustling Great Lakes port:

**Pike Creek (1835–1837):** The original name used by early settlers, named after the creek where they established their claims.

**Southport (1837–1850):** Residents voted to change the name to Southport because it was the southernmost port in the Wisconsin Territory on Lake Michigan. This

name was intended to market the town as a major shipping rival to Chicago and Milwaukee.

**Kenosha (1850–Present):** When the city was chartered, residents chose "Kenosha" to honor the area's original identity. It is an anglicized version of the Potawatomi word *ginoozhe* (or *kinoje*), which means "**place of the pike**" or "**pickerel.**"

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### Why the Change?

By 1850, the "Southport" name felt a bit generic to some residents. Returning to a name derived from the Native American roots of the area was part of a larger trend in Wisconsin at the time (seen also with names like Milwaukee, Oshkosh, and Sheboygan) to give cities a unique and historically grounded identity.

A group of gentlemen signed a petition to the U.S. Senate and the U.S. House of representatives in about 1848 or 1849 requesting \$10,000 dollars to construct a road between Southport and Beloit, Wisconsin. Can you tell me if Congress approved the funds? Based on the historical record of the time, **Congress did not approve the \$10,000 for the construction of that specific road.**

While there was a great deal of petitioning for federal aid during the transition from territory to statehood, the request for a Southport-to-Beloit road followed a common pattern of rejection or inaction by the federal government for several reasons:

#### 1. The "Internal Improvements" Debate

In the late 1840s, there was a fierce national political debate over whether the federal government had the authority to fund local infrastructure (roads, canals, and harbors).

**Whigs** generally supported federal funding for these projects.

**Democrats** (who largely controlled the federal government at the time, including President James K. Polk) generally argued that the Constitution did not grant the federal government the power to pay for internal improvements within the states.

**Polk's Vetoes:** President Polk was famous for vetoing "Rivers and Harbors" bills and other infrastructure spending, famously stating that if the federal government started paying for one road, it would have to pay for all of them, which would bankrupt the treasury.

#### 2. Shift to State Responsibility

Once Wisconsin became a state in **May 1848**, the federal government essentially "washed its hands" of local road construction. Under the new statehood status, the responsibility for such projects shifted entirely to the state legislature and the individual counties.

#### 3. The 1848/1849 Petition

The specific petition you mentioned, likely signed by prominent local "gentlemen" and business leaders from Southport (Kenosha) and Beloit, was part of a final, desperate push to get federal money before the territorial window closed completely.

**Outcome:** Records from the *Journal of the House of Representatives* and the *Congressional Globe* show that while such petitions were often "received and referred to the Committee on Roads and Ca-

nals," they almost never emerged from the committee for a vote.

### What happened instead?

Because federal funds were denied, the local community took a different route: **Private Enterprise**. Instead of a federally funded public road, the **Southport and Beloit Plank Road Company** was chartered by the Wisconsin Legislature in **1848**. Rather than using tax dollars, this was a private toll road built with wooden planks. Investors hoped to profit from the tolls paid by farmers hauling wheat from Beloit to the port at Southport.

However, even the plank road was never fully completed all the way to Beloit, as the **railroad boom** began in the early 1850s, making expensive wooden roads a poor investment.

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### Errors in birth dates and ages stated in marriage and death records.

I found out that one question is very common in early European research: "I found a marriage/death record of my ancestor and when I looked for his birth record, I found one, but the age counted from that birth record is different from the one shown in the marriage/death record. Is it really my ancestor's birth?"

Let's take a look on such issues...  
When someone asks you "how old are you?" or "when were you born?" it's natural for you to know the answer, right?

But it was not natural for our ancestors some two hundred years ago. Years weren't important for them. They lived a cyclic style of life - it was the same every year, beginning with spring seeding to summer

and harvest, then autumn, Christmas and winter. All the same all of their life.

Often every year was the same as the previous one. They were not forced to count the years as it was not important for their career or school or anything else.

That's why they didn't remember how old they were or when exactly they were born. They knew in which part of year they were born - often thanks to their Christian name as they were given the name of the saint whose feast was near to their birth (ie. Václav's were often born in September etc.). But they rarely knew how old they exactly were.

For example they remembered they were born during the reign of Emperor Josef II. - but he reigned for 10 years, so there was a ten year span. Or worse - they remembered that the Queen Marie Theresa was reigning when they were born. But she reigned for 40 years!

Marriage books often show discrepancy of 2, 3 or 5 years - it's nothing strange. It sometimes happens that if there is a large difference of groom's and bride's age (for example 65 years old widower married 22 years old girl), the age was adjusted to hide that huge difference (50 yr + 28 yr).

Death books have even more errors. As the person got older, the estimated age was more and more inaccurate. If someone was the oldest person of the village when he died, it was often claimed he was 100 years old - because no one remembered the time when he was born or young.

Information about the age was often provided by the family - the priest who wrote down the age to the marriage or death registry didn't check this information in the birth books too often. Of course there were

priests who checked this information, but there were not too many of them in the past.

And of course - the family didn't know the exact age. That's why the age in death books is often rounded-up to fives or tens (50, 55, 60, 65 etc.).

If there is just a five years discrepancy between the age in death registry and that counted from the birth record, it's nothing strange and unusual. I even found records where the discrepancy was around 30 years. It just happens... Age was not important to our ancestors - and this is what happens in such cases.

**One last note:** In some areas of Europe a person's birth date was discarded or ignored because the date of Christening was considered the true date of "birth". A person started life with their Christening. In Eastern Europe the child was usually Christened on the day of birth or within one or two days of birth because of the high mortality rate.

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## **“What The Heck” Facebook Group Web Page**

### **How To Join “What the HECK”**

If you would like to learn more about our family, join our Heck Family Facebook Group. Log onto Facebook and search GROUPS for “What the HECK.” You can then request to join the Group. All we ask is that you state how you are related to the Heck family. For example: My grandfather was Alvin Heck or I married Jim Heck. Either Cheryl Heck or Bob Heck will approve you for access. There is no charge to be a member of the Heck Family Facebook Group. Included in the “What the Heck” site are many photographs, document images, video clips, and family news.

Here is the web address for our group page:

**<https://www.facebook.com/groups/Whattheheckfamilygroup/>**

Here is the address in smaller letters so you can see that there are no spaces in the web address.  
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/Whattheheckfamilygroup/>

I encourage all of you to share the link to our “What The Heck” Facebook Group Web Page with all of your family members.

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**This newsletter is written and published by Robert J. Heck.**

Our Family News Letter is published quarterly and is distributed without charge. My e-mail address is **HECK.BOB@gmail.com**

Please feel free to copy and share this newsletter with your family members. If you have old photos and a story behind them that you would like to see in this newsletter, please contact me.

Contributions to keep Our Family News Letter going are always welcomed and can be sent to:  
**Robert J Heck, 4910 Steeple Drive, Greendale, WI 53129.**

Many thanks to our many contributors who help keep this newsletter going. Here are the contributors in 2025:

**Ellen R. Stiner, Don & Sharon Heck, Judi and Steve Behrendt, Rich & Jean Koenen, Jim & Karen Heck, and Lee Ann Heck. God bless all of you for your generosity and support.**

This family newsletter has been published every three months since 1 June 1993. This issue is number 132. That means that I have not missed an issue for the past 33 years. It is mailed to 60 family members and posted on-line for any of our family members.

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## All Issues of Our Family News Letter are On-Line.

Our Family News Letters are now available to you on-line and for free. There are 132 issues of the newsletter covering the period from June 1993 (Issue 1) to March 2026 (Issue 132).

All of the issues are available now at the following web address:

**<http://ourfamilynewsletter.com/>**

Each issue of the newsletter is eight pages in length and is in PDF format so it can be read and downloaded by any computer, tablet or phone. Each issue is filled with the history of our family. Each issue of the PDF file is searchable. You are free to copy and print any issue of the newsletter for you and your family use. The newsletters are copyright protected so you may not use them for any financial gain.

**I encourage all of you to share this link to our family history newsletter with all of your family members.**

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## Food for thought...

My granddaughter, Grace Heck, gave me a book for my family history and asked me to fill it out. I went through several pages and wrote down my thoughts. I'm still working on it. One set of entries caught my attention and I thought I would repeat them here.

### Were you named after anyone?

Yes, I was named after my father Robert Gerald Heck and my paternal grandfather Robert Steven Heck. I chose my confirmation name as Michael after my maternal grandfather John Mikel. I had actually asked to have the confirmation name spelled as Mikel but the Nuns at St. John Nepomuk would not allow me to have that name because they required me to select a Saint's

name. Regardless I always thought of my confirmation name as honoring my maternal grandfather John Mikel.

### Did you like or dislike your name? Why?

I liked the name Bob but disliked the name Bobby. While growing up as a child, if someone called on the telephone and asked for Bob or Robert, we had to ask which one? Bob Jr. or Robert Sr.? Since my Dad was an Alderman for the City of Racine, we got a lot of phone calls that had to be directed to my Dad.

### If you could choose a different name, what would it be?

I am very happy with my present name but when I was in the Air Force and stationed in Germany, my friends all called me B.J. since that was the name on my fatigues: B.J. Heck.

## From the Photo Album...



This photo shows me, Bob Heck, in 1959 at Metz, France. I was stationed at Ramstein, Air Force Base in Germany and two friends invited me to take a day trip to France. We ate French bread and drank wine at a park in Metz.



This picture shows from left to right: Bill Heck, Marjorie (nee Heck) Randolph and Leslie Randolph. The picture was taken in California after a concert by the Rush Tribute Project. Bill is the lead guitarist for the group. Leslie and Marjorie live in California. Marjorie is the daughter of Robert Jerome Heck and Lorraine Doris Simmons.



The Richard Heck family from many years ago ca 1970. Left to right front: Cecelia, Sherry, Richard. At Center is James. Back are Richard (Rick) and Barbara.

The photo above right shows from left to right: John Carl Heinrichs, Robert Gerald Heck, and



Alvin James Heck. Robert and Alvin are brothers and John Carl, who was called Carl rather than John, is a first cousin. Their common ancestors are Henry Frank Henningfeld and Clara Sibilla Elizabeth Stratmann. John Carl is the son of my great aunt Molly (nee Henningfeld) Heinrichs who lived in Wausau, Wisconsin.

I used Gemini AI to approximate the year the photo was taken. Gemini said: Based on the styling of the vehicle in the background, **this photo was likely taken between 1929 and 1932.**

The car appears to be a 1929–1930 Chevrolet International Series AC or a Series AD Universal. Several specific features help narrow this down: Key Identification Features: Rear Spare Tire: The rear-mounted spare tire with a "spoked" hub was a standard design for Chevrolet and Ford during this window.

Historical Context: However, the men's clothing—specifically the high-waisted trousers and wide-lapel suits—firmly places the scene in the late Prohibition or early Depression era.