



## Breaking Barriers 2020

**Looking for a Wisconsin topic for your 2020 National History Day project?** Read some staff picks below! Each topic suggestion describes the type of history, provides a brief overview, and lists research starting points. Whether you are selecting a Wisconsin topic or not, use Wikipedia. We are serious! Wikipedia is great for getting an overview of a topic to decide whether or not you wish to commit or not. NEVER cite Wikipedia as a source, but each page has a bibliography at the bottom. Visit those sources and cite the quality ones in *your* research. Happy researching and good luck!

### **VICTOR BERGER AND SEWER SOCIALISM IN MILWAUKEE**

Time period: 1897 – 1940s

Type of history: Political, Civil, Social

What is this about? Milwaukee Socialists believed in sharing wealth through community. Many laborers and members of the working class wanted power evenly distributed and believed the Social-Democratic Party could help accomplish this goal in city government. In 1910, Emil Seidel became the nation's first Socialist mayor (Milwaukee), Socialists held a majority of seats in Milwaukee's City Council and other city offices, and continued to hold power until the 1940s. Milwaukee Socialists cleaned up neighborhoods and factories, put in water and sewer systems (how they got their name), parks, and education systems. Most importantly, Victor Berger, the symbol of the party, went to Washington as the first Socialist Congressman.

Keywords: Socialism, Victor Berger, Emil Seidel, Progressivism

Where to start:

[How Wisconsin Became America's Most Socialist State](#) – Wisconsin Historical Society

[Victor Berger, the first Socialist elected to Congress](#) – Milwaukee Sentinel, 1929

*A Milwaukee Woman's Life on the Left: The Autobiography of Meta Berger* by: Meta Berger

### **MISSISSIPPIAN WAY OF LIFE**

Time period: AD 1000 - 1200

Type of history: Native, Social, Defense

What is this about? Home to 10,000 to 40,000 residents, Cahokia, a massive community near present-day St. Louis on the Mississippi River, gave rise to many Midwest communities. One community in Wisconsin was Aztalan inhabited by the Mississippians, descendants of Cahokia and some say one of the greatest civilizations in the world. Much changed for Mississippians after they settled in this place we now call Wisconsin. Community builders copied a similar layout as Cahokia with some 'modern' changes. A wall surrounding the community was an addition to the design probably resulting from a battle or invasion from enemies. These changes are known through discoveries by archeologists. Researchers discovered a previous Mississippian home along the Mississippi River that did not have much protection and suspect

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residents moved to Aztalan in order to be off a popular waterway, out of sight from possible invaders. Mississippians adapted to their environment successfully enough to thrive for 10 generations.

Keywords: Mississippian, Aztalan, platform mounds, Cahokia

Where to start:

[“Who were they and why did they leave?”](#) by: Natasha Kassulke, *Wisconsin Natural Resources Magazine*

*Aztalan: Mysteries of an Ancient Indian Town* by: Robert A. Birmingham and Lynne Goldstein

Visit Aztalan State Park! Walk the land Mississippians lived on and read the markers.

### RED LINING IN MILWAUKEE AND VEL PHILLIPS

Time period: 1950 - 1960s

Type of history: Social Justice, Legal

What is this about? Red lining is the (now illegal) process of blocking off sections of a city to indicate where certain populations can and cannot live. Up until the 1960s, Milwaukee developers and elected officials red lined African Americans into a six by six block radius on Milwaukee’s North Side. Referred to as the ‘Inner Core,’ racist landlords enforced this zone by not renting out apartments to people of color. Red lining did not involve a physical red line on the ground, but on maps created by discriminatory legislators and city developers. This made red lining hard to prove and charge. Vel Phillips, a UW-Madison educated black woman, campaigned for city council and earned her seat as the first woman and African American in an alderwoman and judge position. She fought in all her roles to make discriminatory housing practices illegal. After violent strikes, police and the National Guard arrived to prevent further violence during a tense time. The Fair Housing Marches lead to the Fair Housing Act Phillips wrote six years prior to be passed in 1968, making red lining illegal.

Keywords: red lining, Milwaukee’s inner core, Vel Phillips, fair housing, Father James Groppi

Where to start:

[Crossing the line: Milwaukee Fair Housing Marches of 1967-1968](#) – Exhibit by the Wisconsin Historical Society

[March on Milwaukee](#) – UWM Civil Rights Library

Visit the Wisconsin Black Historical Society! 2620 W Center St, Milwaukee, WI 53206

### PLANK ROAD

Time period: 1850s

Type of history: Transportation, Social, Labor, Geographic, Economic

What is this about? In the 1850s, Wisconsin settlers were looking for better ways to transport their goods across the state. Dirt roads at the time were inaccessible or closed during wet seasons, which made travel hard. Making roads of wooden planks seemed like a reasonable way to fix this problem. Wood was plentiful and other options, like stone roads, were expensive and difficult to make—as well as hard on the feet of animals. Plank roads grew in the 1850s, but their popularity was short-lived.

Wisconsin’s long winters, wet springs and hot summers made the wood fall apart faster than places more north like Canada. These roads were, at first, privately owned and

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paid for by the selling shares of the road. Because the roads were privately owned and not a public good like parks, travelers paid to use the road. Toll booths collected money for the owners, but as the wood began to wear down from travel and weather, the costs became more expensive. This problem overlapped with the development of railroads. Although more expensive, railroads proved to be a more efficient and safer way to transport goods.

Keywords: plank roads, carriage, Wade House, railroads

Where to start:

[Milwaukee-Watertown Plank Road](#) – Watertown Historical Society

[Old Plank Road Trail](#) – Sheboygan County

[“The Lisbon Plan Road Came from Early Indian Trails and Oxen Wagon Roads”](#) by:

Michael R. Reilly Sussex-Lisbon Area Historical Society, Inc.

### BAYVIEW MASSACRE

Time period: 1880s

Type of history: Labor, Social

What is this about? Wisconsin state militia shot at 1,500 factory workers protesting for better working conditions and treatment in Milwaukee factories and seven people died. Mill workers, mostly immigrants, worked ten to fourteen hours a day, six days a week, for about one dollar a day during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Workers joined together to form unions as a show of support and unity against factory owners. The Federation of Organized Trade and Labor, as well as the Knights of Labor in Milwaukee fought hard to pass the eight-hour work day with little success. Protests turned violent and eventually law enforcement arrived. It was not until May 5, 1886—the day of the massacre—that factory owners granted laborers an eight-hour work day. A Federal law did not pass until 1938 when President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Fair Labor Standards Act.

Keywords: Bay View Rolling Mill, Knights of Labor, Governor Jeremiah Rusk

Where to start:

[About the Bay View Tragedy](#) – Wisconsin Labor History Society

*Workers and unions in Wisconsin: A Labor History Anthology* by Darryl Holter

“The Bay View Tragedy: Wisconsin’s Fight for the Eight-Hour Workday” *Wisconsin Magazine of History* Fall 2019 by: Anna Pearce (2019 NHD in WI National Finalist)

### VOIGT DECISION

Time period: 1980s-1990s

Type of history: Native, Legal

What is this about? In Northern Wisconsin, violence broke out over Ojibwe spearfishing. Non-Ojibwe residents argued Ojibwe spearfishing and harvesting practices were illegal on reservations and public land. Non-Ojibwe locals protested Ojibwe spearfishing by throwing objects, shouting slurs, and other acts of violence. Ojibwe bands ceded or sold lands to the United States in 1837 and 1842 treaties. However, the Ojibwe kept their “usufructuary rights” or the rights to hunt, fish, and gather on these lands. The Voigt Decision confirmed that Wisconsin had no right to regulate fishing on and off Ojibwe reservations as stated in both treaties. Ojibwe now fish freely after successfully re-claiming their rights.

Keywords: Ojibwe, spearfishing, 1837 treaty, 1842 treaty, usufructuary rights

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Where to start:

[Spearfishing Controversy](#) – Milwaukee Public Museum

[Feature Story: Anti-Spearfishing Concrete Walleye Decoy](#) – Wisconsin Historical Society

*The Walleye War: The Struggle for Ojibwe Spearfishing and Treaty Rights* by: Larry Nesper

### INVENTIONS BY ALLIS CHALMERS

Time period: 1880s – 1980s

Type of history: Industrial, Labor, Agricultural

What is this about? By 1900, the United States became the world's leading industrial nation. One manufacturing leader in Wisconsin was Edward P. Allis in Milwaukee. Rather than extracting, or taking, raw materials like lumber and lead, Allis made finished consumer goods like iron pipes and saws for sawmills. Originally the Allis Company in 1880s, the company became world-famous for making parts in mines, power plants, and public utilities. The company continued to manufacture machinery after a merger with other large engine makers in 1901, re-naming it the Allis-Chalmers Company until the 1980s. Allis-Chalmers impressed everyone by creating the best equipment for milling flour, crushing ore, pumping sewage, mines, and power—they were called, “Company of the Four Powers – Steam, Gas, Water, and Electricity.” The company continued to develop designs to make power. In 1923, the company completed work at Niagara Falls installing the largest hydroelectric unit in the world. Allis Chalmers went on to build an even bigger turbine for the Hoover Dam, help on the World War II Manhattan Project, and continued in the field of nuclear power until they entered bankruptcy in 1987.

Keywords: Allis Chalmers, Tractor Foundry, Industrial Era

Where to start:

[Allis-Chalmers Governor](#) – Wisconsin Historical Society

[The Rise of Skilled Manufacturing: How Industry Transformed the State](#) – Wisconsin Historical Society

*An Industrial Heritage: Allis-Chalmers Corporation* by: Charles Edward Weber

### FRENCH FUR TRADE ERA

Time period: 1640s – 1850s

Type of history: Early American, Social, Immigration

What is this about? Jean Nicolet was the first European to arrive on this land we now call Wisconsin. Other French explorers followed, especially fur traders. French fur traders exchanged weapons, beads, and other goods for rich beaver furs. Beaver fur is waterproof, which is ideal hat-making material. Many white explorers flocked to the Great Lakes region to seek fur, causing the market to burst. Goods were shipped to posts and warehouses around the state because there was high demand. With money and goods flowing, the way of life for tribes changed drastically. Indigenous communities had to trap animals nonstop in order to keep up with the European traders' trade. This new economic, or money-making, job took over all forms of Native life, and new goods like metal tools and weapons changed daily way of life to be more modern.

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The money coming into the area put this region on the map, leading to a new state called Wisconsin.

Keywords: Ouisconsin, Jean Nicolet, Missionaries, colonialism, trading posts, beaver fur

Where to start:

[The Fur Trade Era: 1650s to 1850s: A Short History of Wisconsin](#) – Wisconsin Historical Society

[Wisconsin Fur Trade “Ouisconsin” \(1640s-1763\)](#) – Milwaukee Public Museum

[Fur Trade and Explorers](#) – Heritage Parkway

### **SOCIAL SECURITY**

Time period: 1920s-1930s

Type of history: Economic, Legal, Labor, Social

What is this about? The failure of America’s economic system (how money is exchanged) caused the stock market to crash in 1929 leading to the Great Depression. This meant job loss, business closings, and struggling families. President Franklin D. Roosevelt started the Committee on Economic Security, chaired by UW-Madison economist Edwin E. Witte, to lessen suffering and safeguard for the future. In 1935, the Committee recommended, and Congress later approved, a bill to provide unemployment compensation, old-age benefits, as well as other aid. Wisconsin natives Arthur Altmeyer and Edwin Witte helped design this Social Security Act based off the “Wisconsin Idea” concept. The Wisconsin Idea started by UW-Madison professor John R. Commons believes all University of Wisconsin schools should always be working and researching to improve the lives of all citizens in Wisconsin. The Social Security Act reflects the same idea of improving the health and lives of all people, thanks to Wisconsinites. This program is still happening today and Wisconsinites continue to be invited to assist with economic problems in government.

Keywords: John R. Commons, Edwin Witte, Progressivism, Wisconsin Idea

Where to start:

[Social Security: The Wisconsin Connection](#) – Wisconsin Historical Society

[Why Social Security](#) – Social Security Board Booklet published in 1937

[Depression and Unemployment: Hard Times in Wisconsin](#) – Wisconsin Historical Society

### **WOMEN’S SUFFRAGE**

Time period: 1848 - 1920

Type of history: Women, Social, Political

What is this about? Women began asking for the right to vote with a number of other rights such as the ability to own property. Social change takes a long time so there were many movements and efforts within the 72 year period of women asking for the right to vote. Women in Wisconsin, across the nation, and around the world were all asking for more rights during this time. Some important Wisconsin women included Olympia Brown, Ada James, and Theodora Winton Youmans. The movement was mainly middle-class white women and this also caused some issues regarding race and immigrant groups.

Keywords: Woman suffrage, voting, Theodora Winton Youmans, Olympia Brown, Ada James

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### Where to start:

*On Wisconsin Women: Working for Their Rights from Settlement to Suffrage* by: Genevieve G. McBride

[The Woman's Suffrage Movement Document Bank](#) – Wisconsin Historical Society  
[“How Wisconsin Women Won the Ballot”](#) *Magazine of History* by: Theodora W. Youmans

### **MAGIC IN WISCONSIN**

Time period: 1890s – 1940s

Type of history: Entertainment, Social

What is this about? Harry Houdini, originally born Erik Weisz in 1874, began a career in the art of escape and illusion in Appleton, Wisconsin. He claimed his first introduction to the art of magic occurred in 1880 when the P.T. Barnum Circus (another Wisconsin original) came to town. The Weisz Family moved a lot, often struggling to support themselves. Erik eventually decided to follow his dream of magic with a friend with an act called, “Brothers Houdini” after French magician Jean Eugene Robert-Houdin. By 1896 the act separated and renamed Harry and wife Bess took their new act on the road. The two started off unsuccessful. They played at small beer halls and circuses, never able to earn a decent wage. It was not until Harry found his true calling in the art of escape. He challenged local chiefs of police to restrain him with their most secure locks and impressed the crowd with an escape in less than five minutes! As his fame grew, so did the danger. To keep crowds he added more elements, eventually gaining him performances around the world and for President Teddy Roosevelt. Later on in his career, Houdini became a key figure on the debate over spiritualism and mediums. On his 1926 farewell tour, he claimed he could withstand any punch. One audience member punched him and two weeks later he died from an undiagnosed case of chronic appendicitis. It is unclear whether the blow ruptured his appendix, but it definitely contributed to the legendary magician’s untimely death. His legacy lives on through inspiring magicians worldwide and local, like Ben Berger.

Keywords: Harry Houdini, circus, magic, vaudeville, Ben Berger

### Where to start:

[“The Bonds he Did Not Break: Harry Houdini”](#) by: Kimberly Louagie *Wisconsin Magazine of History*: Volume 85, Number 3, Spring 2002

Visit the Houdini Exhibit at the History Museum At the Castle in Appleton!

*Highlight Magic* by: Ben Berger