



STEVENS POINT'S TOP 10 MEMORABLE EVENTS

Here are some thumbnail sketches about the 26 memorable events:

Hathaway Survey – 1839: In 1839 Joshua Hathaway began his survey of the Wisconsin River under a contract from the federal government. The contract called for him to survey the land for three miles on each side of the river from near the modern city of Nekoosa north to the Big Eau Pleine River at the northern edge of today's town of Dewey in Portage County. Once the land was surveyed, it was subdivided and then sold to pioneers to mark the beginning of settlement in the area. Hathaway's survey paved the way for development of the area, and his field notes provide the earliest material evidence about the people and places in Portage County and the upper Wisconsin River.

George Stevens stops by – 1839: Stevens Point is named after George Stevens, but Stevens has little to do with the city's history. He was mainly a visitor to the community, landing on a point or peninsula in the Wisconsin River near the west end of Main Street before heading north to Wausau where he had a lot to do with the founding of that city. Stevens built a log "shanty" on the "point" where he stored his goods for his supply canoes before he began his journey to Wausau where he built a saw mill in 1840. Somehow the name Stevens Point stuck for the community that built up in the area.

Mathias Mitchell land grant – 1847: Mathias Mitchell was an early pioneer in Portage County who in 1845 purchased land in the area that was to become downtown Stevens Point and built the first tavern-hotel in what would become the city, with his purchase marking the first time "Stevens Point" was used in public records. Two years later he purchased additional land in the area and then deeded 1-1/2 acres to the village of Stevens Point so it could be used as a Public Square by farmers. Public squares were a heritage of New England, but not common in many Midwestern communities.

When Lumber was King: Gateway to the Pineries – 1848-1870: Northern Wisconsin was covered with forests when the first pioneers moved into the area, and Stevens Point was a logical lumber center because it was located at the head of Shaurette Rapids, an area below the Black Bridge of the CN, between Mosinee and Wisconsin Rapids.

The river was a natural way for loggers to float their harvest of pine trees down to St. Louis, Mo., and booms, rollways and slides were installed to help them. In 1876 there were 25 saw mills and 16 shingle mills operating in Portage County, and most of the river through Stevens Point was lined with logging operations.

Beginning of Polish immigration – 1857: Michael Koziczowski was the first Polish immigrant to settle in Portage County and he brought his family first to Stevens Point before settling in the Polonia area. Other Polish settlers moved into the city of Stevens Point after the Rev. John Polak, the first Polish priest in the city, arrived at St. Stephen Church in the 1860s. Rev. Polak is credited with persuading Polish immigrants to settle on the north side of the city, where St. Peter Catholic Church was eventually built after \$800 was raised to purchase four lots and a house on Fourth Avenue between First and Second streets, the site of the present church.

Stevens Point Brewery – 1857: The Stevens Point Brewery is the city's longest established business, started by German immigrants George Ruder and Frank Wahle, a year before the city was incorporated. The brewery has experienced several ownership changes throughout its history. Point Special Beer became the best-selling brand from the brewery in the 1880s, and the brewery has continued to brew a beer under that name, although it was forced to cease brewing alcoholic beverages during Prohibition when it produced soft drinks and near beer, a product that removed the alcohol from real beer.

City Incorporation – 1858: On May 17, 1858, the Wisconsin Legislature granted the city a charter to incorporate as a city. The charter, a handwritten document on file in the office of the secretary of state, includes nine chapters and almost 33 pages, all of the text handwritten. The charter establishes the city limits within a 2-1/4-square-mile area and created three wards. The charter also granted the city the authority to collect taxes and established the elective city offices and the Common Council to govern the city.

County seat battle – 1868: Four years before Wisconsin became a state, in 1844, Plover, then a promising lumber center, became the county seat for Portage County when the county's area was much larger than it is now, occupying nearly half the state. But Stevens Point was growing faster and soon suggestions were made to move the county seat to the city, because Plover was still only a village. On Aug. 1, 1868, an election was held and Stevens Point received 1,116 votes to become the county seat, while Plover got 786.

Wisconsin Central Railroad – 1871: The Wisconsin River was the major means of transportation for commerce in Stevens Point in the city's early history, but that all changed in 1871 when the city was selected for a route of the Wisconsin Central Railroad, winning the nod because the route from Menasha was flatter than a route to Wausau. The first train rolled into the city on Nov. 15, 1871, and the city continued to serve as a hub for the railroad industry for more than a century.

Shooting Point – 1870s and 1880s: The rough and tumble world of logging usually triggered a number of fights, and for a time in the 1870s and 1880s the city was called "Shooting Point" because there was probably as much gunplay in the city as in the so-called Wild West. Murders, woundings and attempted shootings were common; and convictions were few, with the murderers and shooters having more to worry about from the victim's relatives and friends than from the law. On Oct. 18, 1875, Amos and Isaiah Courtwright, accused of killing Sheriff Joseph H. Baker on Oct. 11, 1875, when he led a posse to repossess their town of Buena Vista farm, were taken from the Portage County jail in Stevens Point and lynched from a tree near the site of the present Portage County Health Care Center at the corner of Water Street and Whiting Avenue.

Telephone exchange – 1882: Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone in 1876 and six years later a telephone exchange was established in Stevens Point, connecting the railroad depot on the south side, the depot in the downtown area, the principal hotels, the engine houses, businesses and some private residences. Within years the Wisconsin Telephone Co. was operating in the city and in 1904 the hand-crank telephone to notify the operator was replaced by phones that the user merely had to lift the receiver to be greeted by the operator's "number please" request.

Normal School – 1893: Wisconsin wanted to construct a new normal school in the northern part of the state, and real competition between Wausau and Stevens Point to become the site of that school began in 1891. On July 28, 1893, the Board of Regents met in Madison to decide between Wausau and Stevens Point. After 101 ballots, a telegram was sent to Stevens Point, saying "To the boys at Stevens Point – The world is ours. Stevens Point wins on the 101st ballot." The message triggered massive celebrations around the city, and in 1894 the Main Building of Stevens Point Normal School (now the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point) was constructed.

Frost Fishing Tackle Co. – 1896: Miss Carrie J. Frost, a Stevens Point woman, began making flies for fishing at her kitchen table, beginning an industry in the city that would soon earn it the nickname "The Fly Fishing Capital of the World." The C.J. Frost Fishing Tackle Co. (she used her initials so purchasers wouldn't know a woman headed the company) became the Weber Lifelike Fly Co. and later the Weber Tackle Co.

St. Michael's Hospital – 1913: Stevens Point got its first hospital in the 1880s for lumbermen, and then the city got a small private hospital. Anyone who needed specialized care had to go to Oshkosh or Fond du Lac. Stevens Point finally got its first public hospital, St. Michael's Hospital, after it was constructed in 1912-13 on a donated two-acre site on Fremont Street. The hospital, owned by the Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother, who now operate Ministry Health Care, admitted its first patient on Jan. 28, 1913.

Hardware Mutuals – 1912: Wisconsin Hardware stores housed flammable materials on their premises, but were unable to obtain insurance to cover fires so the Wisconsin Retail Hardware Association formed its own insurance company in 1904 in Berlin, Wis. When the secretary of the company died in 1911, P.J. Jacobs of Stevens Point succeeded him and in 1912 the company was moved to Stevens Point, eventually becoming Sentry Insurance.

Consolidated Water Power and Paper Company – 1918: The paper mill industry in the Stevens Point area got its start in 1918 when Consolidated Water Power and Paper Company constructed the Stevens Point Division on the east bank of the Wisconsin River between Arlington Place and Wisconsin Street. The paper industry was relatively new in the area, with the first mill George A. Whiting founded the Wisconsin River Pulp and Paper Co. at what is now the Wisconsin River Division of NewPage in 1893. For decades the paper mills were the major employers for Stevens Point residents.

Prohibition – 1920: The production and consumption of alcoholic beverages was prohibited in the United States between 1920 and 1933, and Stevens Point became a hotbed for production of illegal beer and liquor. Numerous citizens in the city and outlying areas wound up in jail because of the production of moonshine and other alcoholic beverages, and many Stevens Point ceilings were ruined because of mild explosions in homes caused when the brew made with malt syrup, a staple item in grocery stores in those days, went wild.

“The City of Wonderful Water” – 1922: Stevens Point initially received its water from the Wisconsin River through a plant in what is now Bukolt Park, but the water developed a savory reputation, prompting the Common Council to purchase the privately-owned water company and make it a city-owned operation. In 1922 the city purchased property along the Plover River in Iverson Park and the quality of that water supply from the Plover basin gave the city its reputation as the “City of Wonderful Water.”

Fire on the wagon bridge – 1923: Until the HH bridge over the Wisconsin River was constructed in 1999, Stevens Point and Portage County had only one crossing across the Wisconsin River, the Clark Street bridge. On May 30, 1923, that connection was severed when the wooden wagon bridge caught fire and burned in a smoky blaze. The bridge was finally replaced with a new concrete structure that opened Jan. 1, 1926, after residents used a ferry to go back and forth across the river.

Public Radio Station WLBL – 1924: The state Department of Agriculture and Markets started a radio station in WPAH in Waupaca in 1922 to get market and crop information to the farmers. The station was moved to Stevens Point in 1924 and the call letters were changed to WLBL. Initially, the station was located in the Whiting Hotel, but in 1937 it moves to Central State Teachers College (now the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point) where it was housed in the Campus Training School building (now the Communication Arts Center) until the state moved the station to Auburndale in 1951.

Civilian Conservation Corps – 1933: The Depression took a toll on Stevens Point and Portage County, and many young men found themselves without jobs, that is until President Franklin D. Roosevelt established the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), a work relief program for young men. The corps was designed to combat poverty and unemployment, and Stevens Point benefited from the program, with the CCC constructing P.J. Jacobs Junior High School and buildings in Bukolt Park, Iverson Parks and at other locations in the city.

Stevens Point Airport is dedicated – 1942: The first airport in Stevens Point was constructed in 1928, a grassy field in an area east of Washington School, but the site soon became too small so city officials selected a new site, the present airport location. The field was dedicated Sept. 20, 1942, and soon became the training site for small detachments of Army and Navy pilots early in World War II. After the war, the airport was utilized for regular airline service, which it relinquished after the construction of Central Wisconsin Airport.

Water Fluoridation – 1949: Fluoridation of water to prevent tooth decay was a lightning rod in Stevens Point for nearly three decades before the Common Council approved fluoridation in 1949 at the request of the local dental society and the Board of Health. The Water Department began adding sodium fluoride to the city's water in 1950, waiting a month before telling residents, an action that infuriated opponents of fluoride who circulated a petition for a referendum on the issue. Fluoride lost by a 2-1 margin in a 1950 referendum, and then 3-2 in another referendum a decade later before the Common Council finally approved fluoridation in 1972.

CenterPoint MarketPlace – 1981: Communities throughout the United States began constructing enclosed shopping malls in the 1970s and early 1980s and Stevens Point held a referendum in 1981 to see if it should follow suit and construct a mall in its downtown area. Voters approved the construction and the city began purchasing parcels for construction of the structure, which finally opened in 1985.

Hmong immigrants from Southeast Asia – 1986: More than 100 years since the first mass immigration into Portage County, Laotian Hmong war refugees began settling in the Stevens Point area following the communist takeover of Laos. Like the immigrants of a century earlier, the Hmong began adapting to American culture and practices, assimilating into society.

Opening of Green Circle Trail – 1996: The Green Circle Trail started out as a dream for a number of area residents in 1989 who talked about linking publicly owned land through a series of trails in the Stevens Point area. The group began creating the trail through land easements from private residential and business land owners, opening a 22-mile trail on June 1, 1996. The trail is now a 30.5 mile circle with 14 contiguous segments.