

INCREASE LAPHAM &
LORINE NIEDECKER

PAUL G. HAYES & MARTHA BERGLAND

*I sent University of Wisconsin
Milwaukee a copy of T&G way back
in Sept. A few days ago I wrote: Did
you fail to receive? They answer they've
placed it with regional materials. I
should ask: What region—London,
Wisconsin, New York?*

–LN in her December 7, 1969
letter to Cid Corman

WHAT REGION?

- 1.1 *Lorine Niedecker's Century 1903-2013*
- 1.2 *Increase Lapham & Lorine Niedecker*

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A Paper Delivered at the Lorine Niedecker Wisconsin Poetry Festival

11 October 2014

*Asa Gray wrote Increase Lapham:
pay particular attention
to my pets, the grasses.*

This thirteen-word poem is where we began our wandering among the twined roots of two of the greatest observers of Wisconsin, our greatest poet and our greatest scientist, their roots deep in the natural world. Though they lived in different centuries, they shared

a deep love of their place, this place. They were both writers who valued the exact word. These two intense and quiet people were passionate about stories of exploration and history. And both were determined to do their chosen work no matter that there was not a dime in it for them.

Lorine Niedecker (1903-1970) needs no introduction to this audience, but we may need to condense for you the life of Increase Allen Lapham, who lived from 1811 to 1875. He came to frontier Milwaukee in 1836 at the age of 25 after working on canals in New York, Ohio, and Kentucky. While living and raising a family in Milwaukee, he worked as an engineer, surveyor, land agent, cartographer, archaeologist, and limnologist. He wrote Wisconsin's first scientific paper, a list of plants and shells found in Milwaukee, in 1836. In 1844, he completed the first book published in Wisconsin, a geography that attracted immigrants to the state. Lapham's surveys, maps, and descriptions of Wisconsin's effigy mounds were for 150 years the only comprehensive source of knowledge about the effigy mound builders of Wisconsin. As well as writing the first official national weather forecast, Lapham is still known for his botanical and geological studies of Wisconsin. His support of public libraries, natural history collections, and public and private education for both men and women, and his insight that current accurate records of events are tomorrow's reliable history, set the standard for progressive, enlightened thinking throughout the new state of Wisconsin.

Increase's and Lorine's lives were lived afoot. That is, no detail escaped either one. Both were slight people, Increase short even then for a man, though he was strong and could walk miles and miles. Lorine had light hair and Increase very dark hair, but both were blue eyed, sharp-eyed. Both Increase and Lorine were described as having quick, short steps. We can almost see them walking together, their eyes on the bloom of the puccoon, or the bottle gentian, the wild



A page from Lapham's 1838 botanical diary in which he listed plants he observed in flower stage. (Wisconsin Historical Society, WHS-100342)

orchid, the pitcher plant in the bog, the flowering ridge. Both had an eye for what happened eons ago. And what would happen soon, if we didn't pay attention.

*Asa Gray wrote Increase Lapham:
pay particular attention
to my pets, the grasses.*

This poem by Niedecker was published in *New Goose* in 1946. She tells us in the poem where the words come from. But what is the story of these words, which, after all, she didn't write but selected, recognizing a poem when she read it? Before Asa Gray wrote to Increase Lapham, Increase Lapham wrote to Asa Gray.

INCREASE LAPHAM TO ASA GRAY

In the spring of 1836, Increase Lapham was busy in Columbus, Ohio finishing his work as secretary to the Canal Commission Board, collecting and cataloging Ohio plants. Though Increase had accepted a job as a business manager for Byron Kilbourn in Milwaukee, he had changed his mind; he didn't want to go to Milwaukee. He would miss his Ohio family and his many naturalist friends in Ohio. So, with the help of his brother Darius, Increase was looking for a way to stay in Ohio. But during these unsettled months, Increase was also collecting shells and sending specimens off to naturalists, making geological observations and writing about them, and he was collecting plants and sending specimens on to botanists. It was in April of this unsettled time that Increase wrote Asa Gray. We don't have that letter, but we have his report of it.

On June 6, 1836, Increase wrote a botanist correspondent, Dr. C.W. Short in Lexington, Kentucky, "I am now on my way to Milwaukee, a new 'city' lately founded in Wisconsin ... where I expect to reside. As the mail passes there twice a week I hope to hear from my friends occasionally, even at that remote place." (Julia Ann Lapham typescript, Increase Allen Lapham Archives, p. 323, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives) Lapham told Short that the previous April he had taken it upon himself to place in a Columbus newspaper a notice of the publication of the botanist Asa Gray's pamphlet *North American Gramineae and Cypraeceae*. *Gramineae* was the term until 1895 for the grasses, one of the largest families of plants, there being more than 10,000 domestic and wild species, including corn, rice, barley, wheat. And *cypraeceae* were the sedges, monocots like the grasses, but having triangular stems and leaves in spirals of three, rather than two. Asa Gray, soon to become the most prominent botanist in the country, was at that time at the Lyceum of Natural

History in New York. In a few years, he would be founding the botany department at Harvard, starting the herbarium and botanical gardens there. Lapham wrote Short that he hoped this notice of Gray's book in the Columbus paper might increase its sales. It should be read, he told Short, by agriculturalists as well as botanists.

Almost exactly one hundred years before Lorine Niedecker read the words of Asa Gray and made her famous poem, Increase Lapham initiated his decades-long correspondence with Gray. This lost April 1836 letter to Asa Gray was the first of the correspondence between the botanists Lapham and Gray.

Lapham told Short, as well, that he had sent Asa Gray a package of plants, but two months later, Asa Gray had not responded. Lapham had sent Gray 39 specimens of *carex*, sedges in the family *cypraeaceae*, plants he knew Gray would be interested in.

ASA GRAY TO INCREASE LAPHAM

In the middle of June 1836, Increase left on his two week trip from near Cincinnati to Milwaukee, a trip that took him by steamship from Lake Erie north along Lake Huron, through the straits of Mackinaw and down along the east side of Lake Michigan to Chicago, then to Milwaukee. On the way, he stopped in Detroit. And while in Detroit, he wrote again to Asa Gray asking if Gray had received his letter and the 39 *carex*.

Ten days after this letter from Detroit, Asa Gray wrote back explaining his non-response. By then Increase was in Milwaukee. Gray's three-page June 28th letter from the Lyceum of Natural History, received July 21st, is one of the first letters Increase received here in Wisconsin. It's a good letter, not just because of the famous lines Lorine picked out. Gray tells Lapham, "You were right in your suspicion that your former letter and parcel had failed to reach me. Immediately on receiving your last I went down to Fellows Read & Co where I found your parcel, which had lain in quiet obscurity for several months."

Gray then responded immediately to Increase's 39 *carex* specimens with his own numbered list identifying them by their Latin names. Gray notes that some of Increase's specimens are "quite too young" or too "imperfect" to identify, but he does name, at least tentatively, more than 20 of the *carex*. And Gray gracefully continues: "I thank you for your kind offer to collect specimens, and shall be pleased to correspond with you, especially as I know you will meet with many very interesting plants in the region where you propose to reside. I would like to receive not only Grasses, which never come amiss in any quantity, but also all the other plants you collect at Milwaukee. In return I will most readily give you any information, which my metropolitan situation enables me to command and

will afford, in every way all the assistance in my power in your botanical pursuits.”

Then comes the famous sentence from which Lorine made her poem: “Let me entreat you to pay particular attention to my *pets*, the Grasses &c, but don’t neglect the others.”

Gray continues. “I will see that you have due credit for every interesting discovery. A few of our botanists think of establishing a botanical magazine, to which all the lovers of the science will be invited as contributors. What do you think of it.” To young Increase Lapham, a long way from his beloved family, among strangers in a raw town on the frontier, the intellectual generosity of Gray’s letter must have been welcome.

“If successful,” Gray writes, “will you furnish us with a sketch of the vegetation &c of Wisconsin, in due time?” This may be one of the sources of Increase’s idea to publish a few months later his pamphlet listing the plants he found in Milwaukee, the first scientific publication in Wisconsin Territory.

Before closing, Gray goes back to the *carex* Increase sent from Ohio, telling him that “most of them are common here, but I much desire more good specimens of nos. 20, 29, & 32.” He closes with encouragement: “You will meet with numerous & still more interesting species in Wisconsin.”

You can imagine what it felt like to sit in the Wisconsin Historical Society archives and hold this letter in our hands, imagining it also in Lorine’s hands, in Increase’s hands, and in Asa Gray’s.

INCREASE LAPHAM EXPLORES FORT ATKINSON

Within days of arriving at Milwaukee in July 1836, Increase Lapham was at work planning a canal for Byron Kilbourn that would connect the waters of Lake Michigan at Milwaukee with those of the Rock River in the Mississippi River watershed. The western terminus of the canal would be near the mouth of the Bark River just north of village of Fort Atkinson. Lapham went into the field to locate the route in the summers of 1836 and 1837.

He was impressed by Fort Atkinson, a “thriving village situated on both sides of the Rock river ... and immediately below the mouth of the Bark River,” as he described it in his 1844 book on Wisconsin, the first commercial book published in the territory.

If the canal had been built, Fort Atkinson would have developed as a busy canal town. Flat bottom canal boats carrying ingots of lead and zinc from the mines of southwestern Wisconsin would be floated down the Pecatonica River to the Rock River downstream from Beloit. They would be towed upstream through Lake Koshkonong and then through Fort Atkinson to the canal adjacent to the Bark River and thence north and east through the Waukesha County lakes to the Menominee River Valley to Milwaukee harbor. But, after years of planning, lobbying, and the construction of a short section of the canal in Milwaukee, it became obvious that railroads would do the job at much less cost and the canal scheme was abandoned.

When he was in Fort Atkinson in his first two years in Wisconsin, Increase’s trained eye likely noticed some of the many prehistoric Indian effigy mounds on the high ground overlooking Lake Koshkonong and on the right bank of the Rock River leading from the lake into Fort Atkinson. He returned to Fort Atkinson in 1850 on one of his three excursions to survey, map and describe the effigy mounds of Wisconsin for his most impressive book, *The Antiquities*

of Wisconsin, which was to be published by the Smithsonian Institution in 1855.

This time, he made notes and sketches of a rare intaglio mound, not a mound at all but its reverse, an excavation carefully shaped as a panther, on the right bank of the Rock River between Lake Koshkonong and Fort Atkinson. Increase had found a few other intaglio effigies, most in Milwaukee. All except the Fort Atkinson panther intaglio have been destroyed. In 1970, the panther gained protection as a National Historical Monument.

Lorine Niedecker certainly was aware of the mounds, especially the intaglio. The group on the Kosh-konong bluff was across the Rock River and directly south of her Blackhawk Island house. The intaglio was on the route she would have taken when walking from Blackhawk Island to downtown Fort, which she did often, a five-mile trek one way. If she wasn't careful, she'd have walked right into the depression, it being nearly on the shoulder of Riverside Drive.

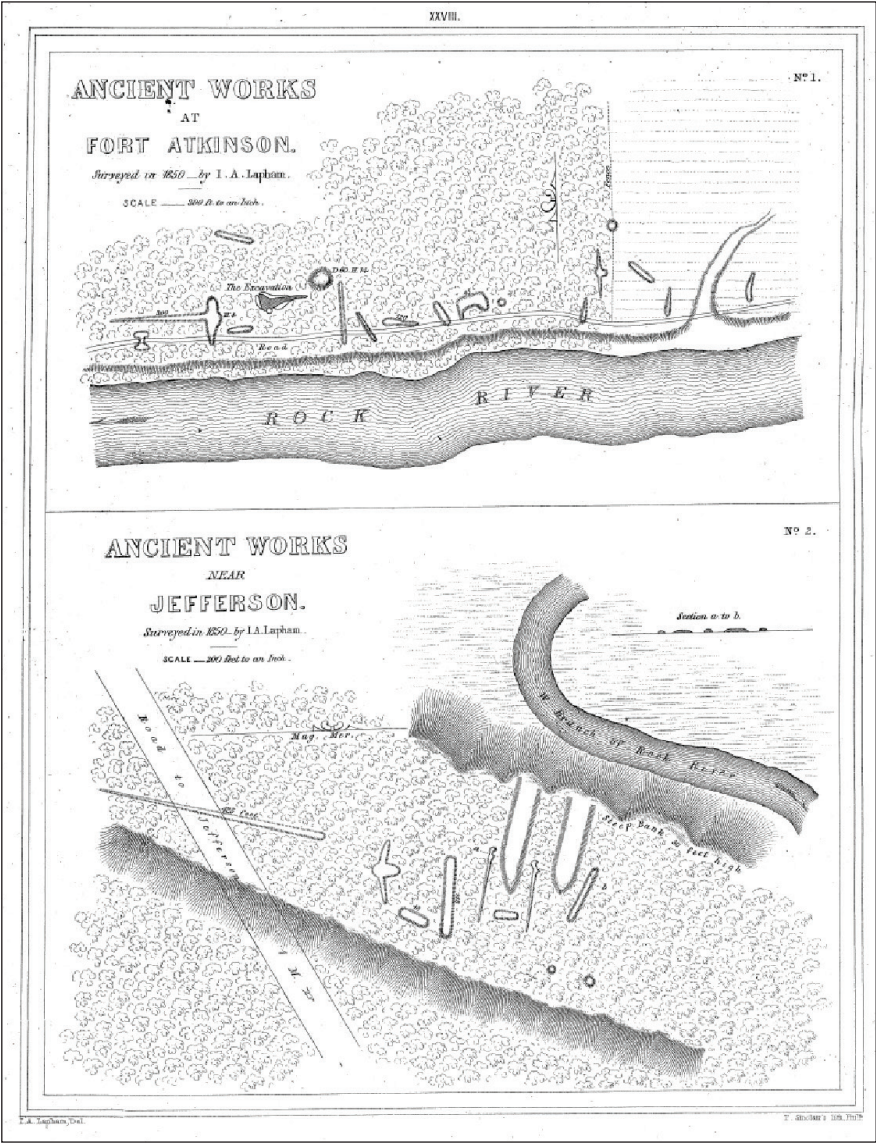


Plate XXVIII,
The Antiquities
of Wisconsin.
Washington:
Smithsonian
Institution, 1855.

LORINE NIEDECKER READS
INCREASE LAPHAM FOR THE WPA

*Grandfather
advised me:
Learn a trade*

*I learned
to sit at desk
and condense*

*No layoff
from this
condensery*

*(Lorine Niedecker, Collected Works, Jenny Penberthy, ed.
Berkeley, University of California Press, 2002: p. 119)*

In 1938, Fort Atkinson poet Lorine Niedecker went to work in Madison for the Wisconsin Federal Writers' Project, one of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal programs to provide jobs in the Great Depression, in this case for unemployed writers. In her two years with the project, Lorine worked on a proposed Dictionary of Wisconsin Biography, patterned after the Dictionary of American Biography. She hung out at the Wisconsin Historical Society, piecing together the facts of the lives of 14 dead Wisconsin citizens, including Increase Lapham, taking lunch or coffee breaks across the street in the Student Union with one or more of her 48 fellow writers.

(Margot Peters, *Lorine Niedecker, A Poet's Life*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011, pp. 62-67.)

In Lapham's case she sifted through scores of neatly-penned, century-old letters between Lapham and his family, fellow botanists and geologists, and public officials. She went through Lapham's clippings, his articles and books, his lists of weather and water data, his drawings of mounds and grasses. She found his short autobiography, Philo R. Hoy's sweet memory of nature walks with Lapham, historian Lyman Draper's 1875 biography of Lapham, Milo Quaife's 1917 article on Lapham. She found Lapham's notes about plants, his articles on drift and stratigraphy, trees, his books about Wisconsin, its antiquities, and its geology. Today this stuff fills 27 archival boxes, each containing a stack of folders stuffed with crisp, neatly folded, ancient, tinted papers.

Niedecker operated her condensery overtime, day in and day out. She reduced, cut, minimized, condensed and condensed some more. Out came nine typed pages, 2,000 words, beginning "INCREASE ALLEN LAPHAM (Mar. 7, 1811 - Sept. 14, 1875), pioneer botanist, geologist, and antiquarian..." She could have added meteorologist, cartographer, engineer, surveyor, limnologist, and zoologist to the list.

Her paper was given to Dr. Joseph Schafer, Superintendent of the Wisconsin Historical Society, for review. He returned it unread with a comment. Crestfallen, she circulated it to an unknown colleague with her penciled, bitter note at the top: "Do you consider this too long? Dr. Schafer, without reading this, thought 2,000 words too many. I consider Lapham a really significant figure." (Lorine Niedecker, Unsigned typescript biography of Lapham, with Niedecker's penciled notes. Also Niedecker's exhaustive check of Lapham sources, typescript, both in Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, WI.)

The WPA's *Dictionary of Wisconsin Biography* project was interrupted first by politics and then by World War II. The manuscripts written by Lorine and her colleagues, some good, many poor, some too long or too short, some incomplete, all went into the archives, unpolished, unpublished, where they lay for years. The biographical dictionary effort was revived in 1950 under Dr. Clifford L. Lord, successor to the late Dr. Schafer. By now, the WPA and the Federal Writers Project were artifacts of a time past. In this new post war prosperity that emerged from the Great Depression and the war, the work was farmed out mainly to academic historians throughout the Wisconsin. Dr. Herbert Rice of Marquette University alone turned out 170 sketches. Professor Fred Olson of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee wrote about scientists. The professors had access to the work of the Writers of the Federal Writers Project. (Introduction, *The Dictionary of Wisconsin Biography*, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, 1960, pp. xi-xiv.)

Project leader Dr. Alice E. Smith asked Walter E. Scott to write the biography of Increase Lapham, knowing that he was a Lapham admirer. Scott, administrative assistant of the old Wisconsin Conservation Commission, was a passionate collector of early Wisconsin books, including those of Lapham. Off hours, he was editor and president of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters, which Lapham helped organize. (Evidence of Scott's appreciation of Lapham is abundant in Wisconsin Academy publications of the time and in letters in the Lapham files of the Milwaukee County Historical Society). In 1960, the Dictionary was published at last, each biography conforming to agreed-upon standards of length, style and citations. At 322 words, Scott's was still longer than most. It began "Lapham, Increase Allen (Mar.7, 1811 - Sept. 14, 1875), pioneer naturalist, author..." His credits included the "Dict. Amer. Biog.; Wis. Mag. Hist., Colls. State Hist. Soc. Wis. and WPA MS." This last was Niedecker's.

But Lorine got her poem out of her effort:

*Asa Gray wrote Increase Lapham:
pay particular attention
to my pets, the grasses.*

Thirteen words. Her condensery may have run out of gas.

READING INCREASE LAPHAM, LORINE NIEDECKER
FINDS A POEM IN DEAD POET JAMES PERCIVAL

Now here is something new. Niedecker squeezed two poems out of her Lapham research:

*Poet Percival said: I struck a lode
but it was only a bunch in a chimney
without any opening
and as I left a sucker jumped me ...
This is truly a rich and beautiful country.*

(Lorine Niedecker, *Collected Works*, p. 119)

This overlooked poem is not in *My Life By Water* or *North Central*. It's missing from T&G. And missing from Cid Corman's *The Granite Pail*. And it's not in Robert Bertholf's *From this Condensery*. I find it only in Jenny Penberthy's *New Goose* and the *Collected Works*. Penberthy notes only that "Poet Percival" was "unpublished," presumably surviving only in manuscript form. She does not otherwise comment on the poem, though she comments on many others in her exhaustive notes. I think that the reason may be that readers outside or inside Wisconsin recognize neither "Poet Percival" nor the Wisconsin mining lore that is the heart of the poem.

James Gates Percival (1795-1856) was a versatile man. A New Englander known as a sentimental and romantic poet, he briefly practiced medicine, taught chemistry and assisted Noah Webster in editing his great *American Dictionary of the English Language*. Percival moved to Wisconsin in 1853 and became State Geologist, concentrating on the lead mining region in the southwestern

counties. Eccentric and bashful, he became known to miners and children as "Old Stonebreaker." He consulted with Wisconsin's all-around scientist Increase Lapham of Milwaukee regarding geology before he went into the field. He completed a first annual report in 1855. A frail man who did not dress for Wisconsin winters he died in 1856, leaving behind an unfinished second report.

Governor Coles Bashford employed Lapham to complete Percival's report. Lapham likely tweaked some of Percival's findings and added his own map. In keeping with his Quaker modesty, Increase left the report in Percival's name and he began it with a generous tribute of Percival that ran in the July 1856 *American Journal of Science*. (Martha Bergland and Paul G. Hayes, *Studying Wisconsin, the Life of Increase Lapham*, Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2014, pp. 283-284.)

Lorine Niedecker would have encountered all this in digging through the Lapham files, the letter from Gov. Bashford and a full accounting of Lapham's work on Percival's report in Newton Winchell's 1896 "American Geologist" magazine, which Lorine cited in her own Lapham biography. (Lorine Niedecker, Unsigned typescript biography of Lapham, with Niedecker's penciled notes. Also Niedecker's exhaustive check of Lapham sources, typescript, both in Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, WI.)

In Penberthy's 2002 *Lorine Niedecker, Collected Works*, "Poet Percival" finds a lode, l-o-d-e, which clearly points to mining in southwestern Wisconsin, although in Penberthy's 2002 edition of Lorine's *New Goose*, "lode" is spelled as "l-o-a-d," taking some of the geology out of the poem. The proof that the poem is about mining

I'd always thought that "Poet Percival" was a reference to Percy Bysshe Shelley sometimes referred to as Percival Bysshe Shelley. In "Progression" (1934) Niedecker quotes from a letter from Shelley to his estranged wife Harriet, so Shelley was in her reading at the time of the New Goose poem. I'll bet she relished that doubleness—her local Poet Percival and the other famous one.

—Jenny Penberthy, April 2015

lies in the word “sucker.” I am from Illinois, named in the 19th century as “the sucker state” at roughly the same time Wisconsin became known as the “badger state” and roughly for the same reason. “Badgers” were lead miners of southwestern Wisconsin who dug into the sides of hills just as badgers do. “Suckers” were Illinoisians who came north to work in the mines, migrating in the spring and returning in the fall, just as the fish called “suckers” do. (H. L. Mencken, *American Language Supplement Two*, Alfred A. Knopf, N.Y. 1948, p. 614.) Thus Niedecker’s poem leaves the impression that poor, suffering poet Percival was jumped by a sucker, or a transient Illinois miner, a shocking development.

Don’t be alarmed. It didn’t happen.

I found the source of the stuff in Niedecker’s poem in a letter Percival wrote to his friend, Edward C. Herrick, treasurer and librarian of Yale College. From Hazel Green, Wisconsin, Percival wrote Herrick on August 1, 1853: “I have found something new and peculiar in every mine I have entered; and yet all conform to one general law, — unity with great variety. I should be pleased to write you a longer letter, — on the country, its scenery, resources, people, their character peculiarities, etc., but I have now little time. ... I will just give you a touch of the mining language:”

And here Percival quotes an overheard story or composes the story himself based on the overheard speech of miners: “I was staked on a prospect and after prospecting several days I struck a lead and raised a lot of bully mineral, but it was only a bunch in a chimney, without any opening so I petered out, and a sucker jumped me.” Percival concludes: “This is truly a rich and beautiful country. Besides its vast mineral resources, it is rich in surface and subsoil, the last peculiar to the mining region, and beautiful exceedingly, whether broken woodland or rolling prairie.” (J. H. Ward, *The Life and Letters of James Gates Percival*, Ticknor & Fields, Boston, MA, 1866, p. 482.)

Now the strike is neither “lode” nor “load,” but “lead.” And it wasn’t poor Percival who was jumped by a sucker but an unknown speaker or speakers whose language Percival’s poetic ear recorded as an example of the jargon of Wisconsin mining. The sound of that speech transcended a century to stimulate another poetic ear, Niedecker’s, who upon finding Percival in the Lapham papers pulled Ward’s biography of Percival from the Wisconsin Historical Society shelves and found the letter.

Furthermore the “sucker” almost certainly did not jump a fellow miner but a fellow miner’s abandoned claim, as claim jumpers do. Poet Percival’s letter to Herrick makes clear that it was indeed the voice of Percival, the sentimental Yankee poet/geologist, who found Wisconsin “truly a rich and beautiful country,” a phrase so agreeable to Niedecker that she lifted it verbatim and finished her own poem with it.

Percival is buried in Hazel Green, Wisconsin, in the heart of the mining district just north of Illinois, the land of the suckers, in “truly a rich and beautiful country.”

To my ear, there is no deeper, richer, exclusively Wisconsin poem than this one. And we wouldn’t have it if Lorine Niedecker hadn’t struck the lode while mining the rich papers of Increase Lapham, which led her to James Gates Percival, the Yankee poet/geologist working in our mining district, where he dug out a gem of jargon.

POEMS OF INCREASE LAPHAM

Inspired by Lorine Niedecker, found in Lapham's journals and letters

by Martha Bergland & Paul G. Hayes, October 2014

THE STEAMBOAT TRITON

left here
with a full load
of passengers.
She got down as far as
Knob Creek
where she broke
her shaft
and the leg of
her engineer.

—October 23, 1827

THE OHIO RIVER

has gone down
nearly
to its proper place
of residence,
at least
it has left
our house
on its journey
that way.

—January 19, 1828

DARIUS AND INCREASE STAKE THE CURVE

Where the turnpike crosses the Canal
there came up a storm
and by the time we were in
the nighest Shanti
the wind began to blow from S. W.
with such violence
as to nearly blow it over;
this blast took up
by the Roots
several sicamore's.

—May 5, 1828

CUCUMBERS FOR BREAKFAST

I went back into the woods.
I met a negro with
a bag of young apples
which were already quite edable,
blackberries are now ripening,
Ranuncules is in flower
as also the wild rose.
I went to the river to see
the boys go in swimming.
A very hot day.
Last night I went into the waters
of the Ohio
which made me very cool & comfortable
during the night.

—June 22, 23, & 26, 1828

GREAT OHIO RIVER FLOOD

Still rising! Still raining!

Frame houses

floating down with

hay, rails, wood

And

almost everything

Else.

Went to a party

In a skiff—

Fell

overboard

going home.

—February 1832

21 YEARS OLD IN PORTSMOUTH, OHIO

Returned to town—

Maple sugar!

high water!—

girls!

—March 8, 1832

NAMING THE BABY

I now decide in full and without
Reserve or equivocation or jesting to call him
HENRY LAPHAM!
So there is an end to the much talked of matter.

Unless,
indeed,
you demur.
In that case, the subject may be opened
Again.

—Letter to Ann, January 20, 1847

PROSPECTING

Missed the way home.
Laid under a log
all night
In the rain
near a creek.
Matches wet,
good for nothing.
Hence no fire.

Comfortless night.

—Upper Michigan, July 2, 1872

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WHAT REGION?

What Region? is a monograph pamphlet series produced by the Friends of Lorine Niedecker and Woodland Pattern Book Center with additional funding from donors *Anonymous A* and *Anonymous B*.

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May 2015

Book Design by
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Lorine Niedecker

WHAT REGION? 1.2