



## Lesson 6 - The Peshtigo Fire



### Nutshell

The Peshtigo fire took more lives than any other fire in American history. Part of its cause was irresponsible use of the forests surrounding Peshtigo, Wisconsin. Students will color code a navigation route, create a mileage “key,” and figure out the shortest route to Peshtigo, WI from their school. They will then act as travel agents and generate a “trip tic” to Peshtigo. Finally, they will read letters from a nine-year-old survivor of the fire.

### Concepts

- Peshtigo is located just north of Green Bay in eastern Wisconsin.
- Maps can be used to locate places of interest and navigate a route from one place to another.
- Leftover slash from logging, irresponsible use of fire, and a very dry summer were all causes of the Peshtigo fire.
- While the Peshtigo fire was extremely violent, fires during that time period were quite prevalent.

### Objectives

- After completing this lesson, students will be able to:
- Locate Peshtigo, WI on a Wisconsin map.
- Identify, describe, and record three navigation routes from the student’s school to Peshtigo, Wisconsin.
- Explain the causes of the Peshtigo fire.

### State Standards

ELA SS EE  
A.4.1 A.4.2 A.4.4  
B.4.1 A.4.4

C.4.3 A.4.8  
D.4.1 B.4.3

### Total Estimated Time

2 hours and 20 minutes

### Vocabulary

**Color code** – to indicate or instruct by using different colors

**Mileage scale** – a divided line on a map used to show what length on the map is used to show a certain number of miles

**Navigate** – to find one’s way

**Sawmill**– a mill that has sawing machines for lumber

**Travel agent** – a person who arranges travel for others

### Materials

Copy of a “Trip-Tic” from AAA (optional)

Wisconsin maps with town names, including Peshtigo, Wisconsin for each student (be sure to add your own town to the map before running off copies)

Colored pencils, fine-tip markers, other drawing materials

Lined and plain paper

Overhead projector

Copies of the four letters for each student (Insert 6.2)

Copies of three Wisconsin maps for each group (Insert 6.1)

### Teacher Preparation

Read through all of the provided materials, photocopy Wisconsin maps, make a Wisconsin map transparency to use on the overhead projector, and copy the four letters for each student.



## Background Information

October 8, 1871 was a disastrous day for two places in the Midwest. Two of the most damaging fires in American history happened on that day. One was the famous Chicago fire, and the other took place in the Wisconsin woods, in a town called Peshtigo. Both were caused by the same conditions: drought, a changing wind, and human carelessness.

Peshtigo, Wisconsin was a typical lumber town of the late 1800's. Located along the Peshtigo River, seven miles upstream from the waters of Green Bay, it was built around a sawmill and surrounded by dense forest. The town's largest employer was the Peshtigo Company, which operated several enterprises including a sawmill with 97 saws, a gristmill, machine shop, and a wooden factory that produced shingles, tubs, pails, and broom handles.

For some time leading up to the Peshtigo fire, burning forests had become almost the norm. The summer and fall of 1871 were the driest on record in eastern Wisconsin. In Peshtigo it had only rained once all summer. In addition, there was plenty of slash (leftover wood from logging) left in the forests that were easily ignitable. Fires were being started to clear land for both railroads and farming. Many of these fires were not monitored, but rather were left to burn. In fact, Peshtigo's residents had found it difficult to breathe due to all the smoke in the air for some time before the famous fire.

The fire that eventually consumed Peshtigo was anything but typical. For one thing, it was not just a ground fire.

The trees were so dry that the fire spread easily to the crowns and could travel above land. In addition, the land itself was on fire. Fire was actually spreading underground from place to place. Finally, it was not just a fire that befell Peshtigo, but a firestorm. Survivors said it sounded like thunder or freight cars coming towards them. The winds were so strong that people were blown down while trying to escape. The term "tornadic fire" has been used to describe the tornado-like fire twisters that demolished things before even burning them.

It is estimated that there were about 2000 people living in Peshtigo and its neighboring Sugar Bush logging settlements at the time of the fire. Estimates of the number killed range from 700 to 1500. We do know that it is the greatest loss of life in a fire in the United States. Those that survived had to jump into the river. Many stayed there for up to five hours waiting for the flames to stop. Even in the water, many had trouble breathing or were injured or drowned by objects and livestock entering the river. Many survivors of the actual fire died soon after from smoke inhalation.

Surprisingly, even after the Peshtigo fire, behavior was not changed to lower risks. Similar disasters occurred up through 1908. In fact, the Peshtigo fire was at first blamed on bogs. There was a consensus of opinion that gasses being released by peat bogs had caused the intensity of the fire, not human carelessness. Eventually, the lessons of fire were learned, but not until far too many lives had been lost.



## Introduction

Have your students close their eyes and read them the following excerpt from Reverend Peter Pernin's first-hand account of the Peshtigo fire.

“The air was no longer fit to breathe, full as it was of sand, dust, ashes, cinders, sparks, smoke, and fire. It was almost impossible to keep one's eyes unclosed, to distinguish the road, or to recognize people, though the way was crowded with pedestrians, as well as vehicles crossing and crashing against each other in the general flight. Some were hastening towards the river, others from it, whilst all were struggling alike in the grasp of the hurricane. A thousand discordant deafening noises rose on the air together. The neighing of horses, falling of chimneys, crashing of uprooted trees, roaring and whistling of the wind, crackling of fire as it ran with lightning-like rapidity from house to house – all sounds were there save that of the human voice. People seemed stricken dumb by terror.”

How did that passage make you feel? Discuss this with your students. Explain that the passage was written by a survivor of the Peshtigo fire. Who has heard of the Peshtigo fire?

### Activity 6.1 - Who Wants To Be a Travel Agent? (1 hour)

Tell your students that before they learn more about the Peshtigo fire, they should first find out where the town is located. Break your students up into groups of about four. Give each group a map of Wisconsin. Have them locate Peshtigo with their group members, reminding

them that it is located near Green Bay, a large city in eastern Wisconsin. Have each group raise their hands when they have located Peshtigo. Go around to all of the groups to check their work and provide help to any who are having trouble.

Now that you know where Peshtigo is, make sure everyone knows where they are located. Have each group locate your town on the Wisconsin map (you may have had to add this to the map yourself). Again, help any groups having difficulties. Today you are all going to be travel agents. What is a travel agent? Give your students some time to come up with ideas. A travel agent helps people make plans for a trip. Today it will be your job to provide your client with several travel options from here to Peshtigo. As a group, you need to identify three possible routes from here to Peshtigo on the map. You will then color code each of these routes on the map.

Next, you will need to figure out the length (in miles) of each leg of the trip. This can be done using the mileage scale at the bottom of the map. Show your students how to measure distance on a scale of miles. Show them how they can line up a blank piece of paper along their navigation route, mark the length of one leg of the route, and line it up with the mileage scale.

Once your students understand how to do this, have them find the shortest of the three routes to Peshtigo and write out the directions for that route. You might want to show your students a AAA Triptic as an example. It might even be helpful to have one available for each



group to look at while they are designating their own routes.

Once your students have completed the task, have each group come up and present their chosen route. After each group has presented, discuss the project with the class as a whole. Did you feel that making the color-coded map and writing out directions was helpful? Did you learn anything? Do you think navigation and map-reading skills are important? Why or why not?

### **Activity 6.2 - Fire at Peshtigo (1 hour)**

Now that you know where Peshtigo is located, you are ready to learn more about what happened there in October of 1871. Have your students read aloud the series of letters in Insert 6.1. There are discussion questions for each letter.

#### **Discussion Questions For Letter 1**

1. What do you know so far about the town of Peshtigo?
2. How old is Claudia?
3. Why did Claudia's family move to Peshtigo?
4. What products were made by the Peshtigo company?

#### **Discussion Questions For Letter 2**

1. What else have you learned about the town of Peshtigo?
2. Are there any clues that something bad might happen?
3. What are the causes of the fires?
4. Are you surprised by Claudia's reaction to what has been going on in Peshtigo?

#### **Discussion Questions For Letter 3**

1. How is the town reacting to what is going on?

2. What are some things that affect the fires?

#### **Discussion Questions For Letter 4**

1. How did this letter make you feel?
2. Besides the fire itself, what were some other things the people had to face?

### **Conclusion**

Have your students write their own newspaper account of what happened in Peshtigo. Each article should chronicle the event and give some quotes from people whether they be survivors, family of those living in Peshtigo, government officials, etc.

Even after the disaster in Peshtigo, fires were common. Explain to your students that while the number of people who died in the Peshtigo fire made it memorable, fires were very common in the Wisconsin cutover lands. Did Claudia seem concerned in her first few letters about the fires? Not really. Fires were considered a normal occurrence.

### **Extensions**

- Have your students listen to the song *Peshtigo* song by Ken Lonnquist (<http://www.kenland.com>)
- Have your students do further research on the Peshtigo fire and the events surrounding it. Then have them develop a timeline of the events.

### **Evaluation**

- Grade the map routes and presentations of the groups.
- Grade the newspaper article.
- Discussion participation.



## Resources

- Lonquist, Ken. *Peshtigo* on Weave.  
<http://www.kenland.com>.

## References

Chips and Sawdust: A Newsletter From Forest History Association of Wisconsin, Inc. February 1989.

Chips and Sawdust: A Newsletter From Forest History Association of Wisconsin, Inc. August 1989.

Chips and Sawdust: A Newsletter From Forest History Association of Wisconsin, Inc. Fall 1996.

Elliot, Kennell M. History of Nicolet National Forest: 1928-1976. The Forest History Association of Wisconsin; 1977.

Foot, George. Frontier Armageddon: Wisconsin's Tragic Peshtigo Fire. American West 16 March/April 1979.

Kouba, Theodore. Wisconsin's Amazing Woods Then and Now. Madison, Wisconsin: Straus Printing and Publishing; 1973.

Pernin, Reverend Peter. The Great Peshtigo Fire: An Eyewitness Account. Madison, Wisconsin: State Historical Society of Wisconsin; 1999.





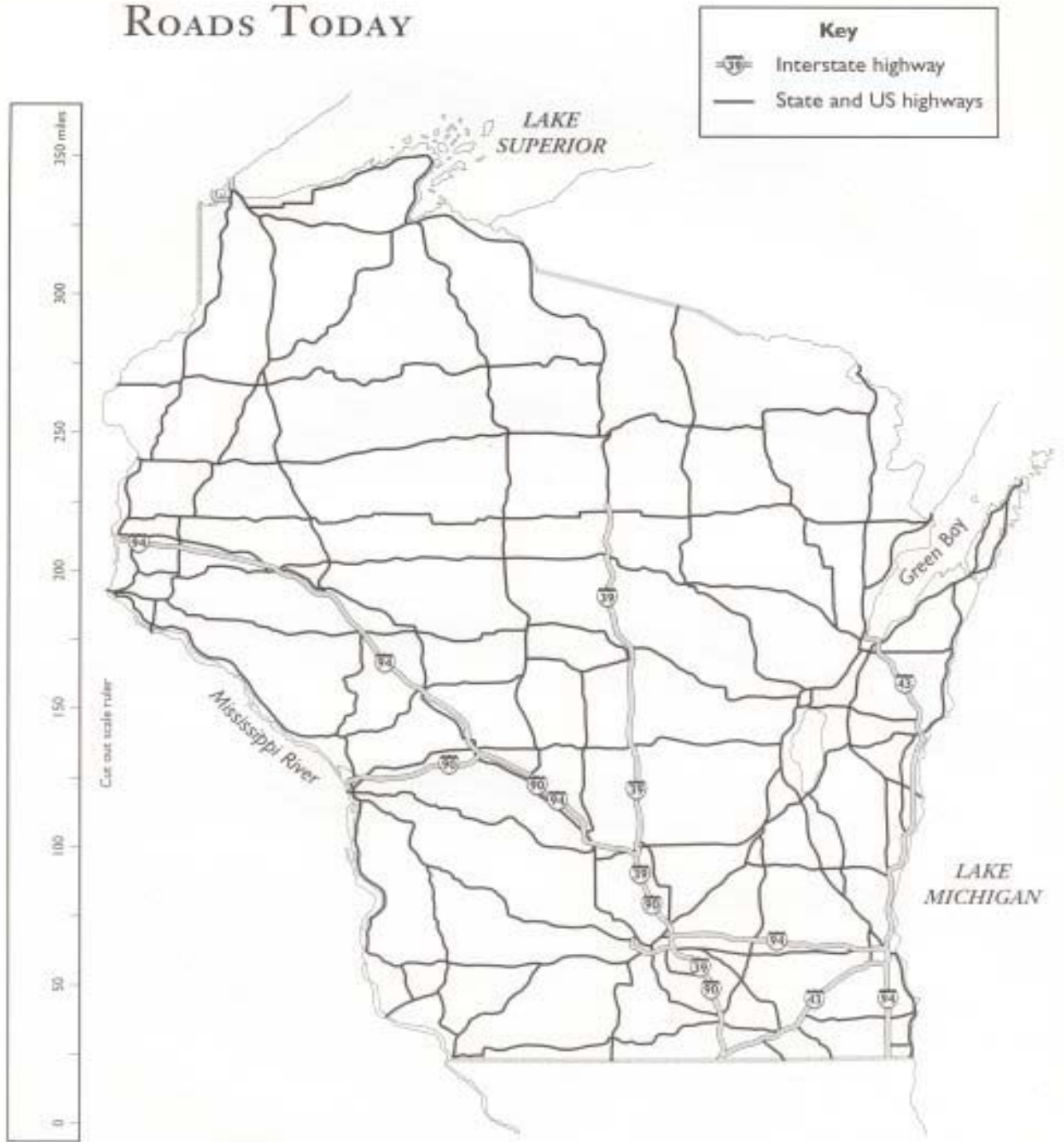
Insert 6.1



Wisconsin Cartographer's Guild and Malone, Bobbi. Mapping Wisconsin History – Teachers Guide and Student Materials. Madison, Wisconsin: State Historical Society of Wisconsin; 2000.



## ROADS TODAY



Wisconsin Cartographer's Guild and Malone, Bobbi. Mapping Wisconsin History – Teachers Guide and Student Materials. Madison, Wisconsin: State Historical Society of Wisconsin; 2000.





## Insert 6.2

August 6, 1871

Dear Alexis,

I miss you so much. I do not like it here in Peshtigo, but father said we needed to move here so that he could get a good job. He is working for the Peshtigo Company. They do all sorts of woodwork there. It is the largest manufacturer of woodenware in the whole country! Father works in the sawmill, but the Peshtigo Company also makes wooden tubs and pails and broom handles and things like that. In fact, it seems like this whole town is made of wood! I mean it. Every single building is built from wood, and even the streets are covered in sawdust to make it less dusty.

I have not met very many other girls my age, but I hope to. Elizabeth is doing fine, but since she is only 10 months old she's not much of a companion. I do get to help mother with the house chores and help her take care of Elizabeth. She says that next year, when I'm 10, she is going to start teaching me how to cook with her. I want to learn now, but she says I have to wait.

The weather here has been dreadfully hot this summer. People keep saying that they cannot remember the last time it has been so hot and dry. It has only rained once the whole summer! That





*makes me happy, because that means I can go out and play every day. What has the weather been like in Appleton? No matter what it has been like, I wish I were still living there. That way we could play all summer long. I really do miss you. Tell Aunt Melinda and Uncle Thomas I say hello. Please write soon!*

*Love,  
Claudia*



September 3, 1871

Dear Alexis,

Things here are getting better. I have met some friends in school. Katherine is my best friend here. Her father works in the sawmill, too, and she has a little sister, just like me. I have told her all about you.

I like the town better now. There is a big river running through it, and it is surrounded by forest. Sometimes Mother will take Elizabeth and me down to the river and I will bring Katherine. We like to play there. Mother usually gets cross with us for getting dirty, but it is so much fun!

I want to go play in the forest, but Mother forbids it. There have been some small fires in the forest and so she is worried. The townspeople are always able to put them out. Sometimes Father has had to leave work to help put out a fire in the forest. He says that they start because people are burning the trees down to clear land for farming and the railroad companies are getting rid of trees to make room for train tracks. It has been so dry that the fires spread easily, but I am not worried. Father and the other men in town know how to put them out.



*Thank you for your last letter. I was so excited when Mother said I had received mail. I hope to hear from you again soon. Send my love to everyone.*

*Love,  
Claudia*



September 27, 1871

Dear Alexis,

Never before have I had such an alarming and exciting Sunday as last Sunday! I told you before that there have been frequent fires in the forest around us. Well, Saturday evening Father was called upon to protect the town from fire. There was a fire so big and so high in the trees of the forest that sparks were blowing across the Peshtigo River and into town. The sparks would catch the sawdust streets on fire, and Father and the other men of the town would have to put it out.

Father did not come home until very early on Sunday morning. Mother and Father thought I was asleep, but I was not, and I could hear Father telling Mother all about it. He said that he could see the tops of all of the trees on fire across the river. A lot of the old pine trees were falling over and the air would be filled with sparks and cinders. To make things worse, he said that the birds of the forest were flying around in a frenzy and making an awful noise.

We went to church on Sunday as usual. The fires had died down. Father was quite tired, but he came with us anyway. In the middle of the church service, the steam whistle from Father's factory blew. Mother grabbed my hand and we all ran





out of the building to see what was going on. Everyone had come out of their churches to see what was happening. The sawdust had caught fire again near the factory, but by the time we got there it had already been put out.

The air was filled with smoke. Poor little Elizabeth was coughing the whole time. All of the men were fighting the fire and moving things from buildings that they thought might burn. Father told us to go back home. He whispered something to Mother and then ran off to help the other men. The whole night was smoky. Mother prayed and kept looking out the windows.

On Monday the wind changed direction and finally blew the smoke away. Father came home and went right to bed. He slept until supper! He said that we were very lucky that things had not been worse. Today all the men are back at work and things are going on as usual. I hope that never happens again! Do not worry about us. Everything has calmed down. I miss you.

Love,  
Claudia



November 2, 1871

Dear Alexis,

I know it has been some time since I have written. I apologize, but given all that has happened I am sure you understand. I know you must be so worried about us. I am happy to report that Father, Mother, Elizabeth and I are all alive and well. It must have been some sort of miracle that we all survived.

I am sure you have seen in the newspapers in Appleton that on the evening of October 8, Peshtigo burned to the ground. It was so awful, Alexis, I will try and explain it to you but I know I will not do it justice.

Sunday, October 8, was a cold and smoky day in Peshtigo, quite similar to most days this fall. In the evening it started to get warmer. This was odd, but we were all happy to not have to have so many layers on. Father came running into the house and said that we all had to leave immediately. Mother and I did not understand, but his voice was so full of fear that we just did as he said. Mother took Elizabeth in her arms and took my hand and we left the house.

As soon as we were outside, we knew why Father was so scared. The sky had turned orange, and



there was fire everywhere. Father said we had to get to the river. The fire was approaching with a loud roar. It sounded like a freight train. The winds were so strong that I could hardly run. It was like a tornado of fire. The wind knocked me down, and Father had to pick me up and carry me to the river.

The smoke was so thick I could hardly breathe. People everywhere were running and screaming. Horses were running loose and trampling people. I could tell Father wanted to help people, but there was no time. We made it to the river and went in until I could hardly stand. The air was so hot and there were so many sparks flying that we had to keep dunking our heads under water to keep from catching fire ourselves. Mother would hold Elizabeth's nose and dunk her under water.

We were in the water for five hours, but it seemed like even longer. It was so cold and smoky. We could hear people crying and screaming over the roar of the firestorm.

Finally we were able to get out of the water. The ground was still hot and there were some flames left burning. We stood next to them to warm up. There were burned bodies everywhere. I took Elizabeth from Mother and tried to comfort her so that I would not have to look at them. The next



*few days I can hardly remember. I was in such a daze and in so much pain from breathing all of that smoke.*

*We are now in Green Bay, staying with a family that offered to take in survivors of the fire. We are so lucky to have made it out of Peshtigo alive. There are hundreds that did not, including my friend Katherine. I remember seeing her father after we got out of the water. Katherine and her mother and little sister had all died in the flames. I miss her, and so many other people. I do not know why bad things like this have to happen. I am so thankful, though, that my family is okay.*

*Father says we might be coming to stay with you soon. I will tell you more then. It upsets me to even write about it, but I wanted you to know that we are okay.*

*Love,  
Claudia*