

French Fort at Prairie du Chien a Myth

By Consul Willshire Butterfield

On the evening of the first Monday in January, 1884, a paper entitled "American History," written by me, was read before the Madison (Wisconsin) Literary Club, in which I took occasion to point out "some assertions not altogether warranted," as I believed, made by Wisconsin historians. I called these assertions, "mock pearls in Wisconsin history." One of the errors, I spoke of was as follows:

"It has long been a tradition, and this tradition has now so hardened into print as, I fear, to be well-nigh indestructible, that the French government, when it dominated over the Northwest, erected upon the prairie at the mouth of the Wisconsin River—'Prairie des Chiens,' as it was anciently called, but now 'Prairie du Chien'—an extensive fort, and garrisoned it with regular troops. As early as 1820, a map was published by the United States, on which is delineated this famous fortification; huge walls with their salient projections, all shown as if some mighty military genius had planned its construction. And it is only last year that our excellent Historical Society devoted, in the last volume of their *Collections*, considerable space to the discussion of its precise locality.

"Now, after all this, what dare we say? I can only venture in 'accents low'—there was never on the 'Prairie des Chiens'—never within what are now the boundaries of Crawford county, Wisconsin—a French military post of any kind; never a stockade or fortification built there by the French, or while France held dominion over this region; nor were French soldiers ever stationed there. No official French document has ever been discovered giving any account of a fort there. No traveler visiting the 'Prairie des Chiens' during the French domination in the Northwest (a period extending from 1671 to 1761) mentions any fortifi-