

# Rueping Leather

PUB-RR-744

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## Rueping Leather

93 Doty Street  
Fond du Lac, WI  
Fond du Lac County

### Location: Downtown Fond du Lac

**A property that housed one of Wisconsin's first businesses makes the uneasy transition from tanning to banking, thanks to help from the city of Fond du Lac and the DNR.**

### History

As a founding business in Wisconsin, the Fred Rueping Leather Company began tannery operations in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, in 1854, only six years after Wisconsin became a state.

In its early years, the company used a vegetable tanning process to tan hides into leather. Vegetable tanning consists of soaking clean hides or skins in an acid solution prepared from the bark, roots, leaves, or nutshells of plants that are rich in tannic acid.

In later years the tanning method of choice was chemical tanning, which used inorganic substances such as aluminum salts, ferric salts, chromium sulphate, and chromic oxides. Such chemical processes are necessary for the tanning process, but these methods can lead to soil and groundwater contamination.

### Investigation & Cleanup

After 131 years in business, the company closed its doors in August of 1985, and filed for bankruptcy. However, due to the bankruptcy there was little investigative or remediation activity done at the 5.2-acre site.

In 1986, the DNR conducted a thorough inventory of waste materials stored on site. The inventory prompted agency staff to request that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Region 5 Superfund Emergency Response Unit initiate a removal action. In 1987, EPA conducted a removal and disposed of more than 30,000 gallons of waste from the site, including acids, PCBs, ethers, pigments, batteries and leather finishes.



Former Fred Rueping Leather Company  
(DNR file photo).

In 1991, with the support of taxpayers, city officials spent more than \$1.5 million dollars to raze the building complex with the hopes of returning the northern portion of the property to productive use.



Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources  
Remediation and Redevelopment Program

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In addition, petroleum-contaminated soil and groundwater from an underground storage tank was discovered in 1991, and further non-petroleum contamination was discovered in 1995.

In 1997 and 1998, the DNR's Remediation and Redevelopment (RR) Program, in cooperation with city officials, conducted Phase I and Phase II Environmental Site Assessments (ESA's) at the property to further define the areas of contamination. This was done as part of the agency's Brownfield Environmental Assessment Program (BEAP).



Marine Credit Union, completed in 2004 (photo by Michelle Stokes).

## Redevelopment

After the degree and extent of contamination were determined and the site was cleaned up, the northern parcel was ready for redevelopment. Marine Credit Union purchased the northwest corner of the northern parcel in 2003 and broke ground for a new credit union in June 2003. In 2004, the company purchased the remaining portion of the northern property, with the exception of a small area the city used to build a new transit stop.

Agency staff worked with developers to utilize the credit union's parking lot and building footprint as a remedial cap, preventing direct contact with soils that contained residual arsenic and metal contamination. A 1.5 to 2.5-foot soil

cap was placed over the remainder of the site. Groundwater contamination is being addressed via natural attenuation.

Today, what was once a defunct tannery with practically no value is now a productive, 8,000-square foot credit union, valued at more than \$1.2 million. Remediation and redevelopment at this site also created sixteen jobs and a new transit stop for the Fond du Lac community.

## Financial, Liability, Technical Assistance

The site received a Petroleum Environmental Cleanup Fund Award (PECFA) in the amount of \$132,581. In addition, the federal Brownfield Environmental Assessment Program (BEAP) was used to fund a Phase I and Phase II Environmental Site Assessment. Throughout the project, RR Program staff reviewed project plans and reports, and oversaw remediation activities taking place at the site.

## Contacts

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