

HISTORY OF WEBSTER COUNTY, IOWA.

BY MAJ. WILLIAM WILLIAMS, SR., FT. DODGE.

A brief history of Webster County, Iowa, from the first settlement in 1849, up till the 1st of December, 1860, also, of the first explorations of the upper Desmoines valley, the causes that led to the establishment of Fort Dodge in what is now Webster County, for the protection of settlers in the north and north-western portion of Iowa, &c.

The writer presents this history without apology to the public, confident that whatever are its merits or faults, they will be recognized and properly estimated. No effort at elaborations has been attempted, but a plain and concise statement of facts. Errors in some particulars may have occurred but from the pains and labor which have been employed to guard against them, it is believed that they are few and unimportant.

THE TERRITORY NORTH OF FORT DESMOINES—THE FIRST EXPLORATION OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY ALONG THE DESMOINES (OR RIVER OF THE SIOUX)—SURVEYS—ATTACK OF THE INDIANS ON MR. MARSH'S SURVEYING PARTY—THEIR ATTACKS ON FIRST SETTLERS—ESTABLISHMENT OF FORT DODGE—THE ARRIVAL OF THE TROOPS, &c., &c.

The territory north of Fort Des Moines and east of the Des Moines river (originally known as the river of the Sioux) was included in the treaty or purchase made by Governor Chambers in 1842; also that lying on the west side of said river, as far north as the correction line, at a point about one mile and three-quarters below where Fort Dodge is situated. West of the Des Moines River from the correction line north, and from that point west to the Missouri River, still belonged to the Sioux Indians when Fort Dodge was established, and up till the ratification of the last treaty made with the Sioux in Minnesota (I think in the year 1851), when the Indian title to all lands within the limits of the State of Iowa was extinguished.

Fort Des Moines was established at the junction of the Des Moines and Raccoon Rivers, as the extreme outpost on the northern frontier, in the year 1843, and was garrisoned by United States dragoons commanded by Captain James Allen,

of the U. S. Army. This post was abandoned in the year 1846. At that time the country lying north of Raccoon Fork (or Fort Des Moines) was comparatively an unexplored region, the habitation of the wild Sioux Indians, buffalo and elk, &c. The only exploration of the country attempted previous to the establishment of Fort Des Moines, was by Captain Boon, of the U. S. Dragoons, who, by order of the Secretary of War, marched with his company of dragoons from *Old Camp Des Moines*, formerly a station of the U. S. Dragoons, situated on the Mississippi river (now *Montrose*). His route was up the Des Moines River to the fork or mouth of Raccoon River; from thence up the River of the Sioux (which the river was then named above the junction of the Raccoon River and Des Moines) to the junction of the east and west forks of the river, twelve miles north of Fort Dodge; thence up the west side of the east branch (which he named "Brother River") to a point at or near Chain Lakes, near the present State line. There the Sioux Indians, after closely watching his movements all the way up, met him in force and gave battle. After a severe brush with the Indians there, he turned his course eastward to Lake Albert Lee (which was named after Lieut. Albert Lee, of his company), and from thence to Dubuque, and down the Mississippi River back to Camp Des Moines.

In 1848, surveys of the lands purchased north of Raccoon forks were commenced. Mr. Marsh, of Dubuque, in the employment of Government, set out with his company from Dubuque, to run and establish the correction line, from a point on the Mississippi to the Missouri River. He progressed with the work without molestation until he crossed the river of the Sioux (or Des Moines), when he was met by a body of Sioux Indians, headed by *Sidom-i-na-do-tah*, a chief. They ordered him to *puc-a-chee* (clear out, be off,) pulled up his stakes and tore down his mounds, and gave him to know they claimed the country, and refused to let him proceed farther. Giving these positive orders, they left him a short distance from the west bank of the river. After some hesitation, Mr. Marsh concluded to proceed with his work. He had not

proceeded over three-fourths of a mile, at a point about half a mile south of the town plat of Fort Dodge, on the bench of land at the head of a large ravine, when the Indians surrounded them in force, and robbed them of every thing, taking their horses, breaking up their wagons and instruments, and forced them back across the river to find their way home the best way they could. In the fall and winter of the same year these Indians attacked Henry Lott, Jacob Mericle, L. Mericle, and one or two others who had ventured up to the Boon forks, and robbed them, and were constantly committing depredations on settlers who ventured up north or northwest of Fort Des Moines, becoming more bold after the troops had left Fort Des Moines. The depredations and outrages committed by these Indians being represented to Government, it was determined to establish a military post at some point on the northern frontier, for the purpose of keeping these Indians in check and protecting the frontier settlers that might come into this section of country.

Early in 1849, Brevet General Mason, Colonel of the Sixth Regiment of United States Infantry, was directed to select a site for a fort as near as practicable to the northwest corner of the neutral ground established by treaty between the Sac, Fox, and Pottawattamie and the Sioux Indians, a strip of country reaching from the Des Moines River to the Mississippi. The north line of this ground is marked about three miles above Fort Dodge, where the post stands marking the northwest corner, on the east bank of the Des Moines River. The site where Fort Dodge now stands was selected on the east bank of the Des Moines River, a short distance below the mouth of Lizard River, which empties into the Des Moines, on the west side. At the same time great excitement prevailed amongst the citizens of Iowa, Tama and Benton counties, owing to a large body of Sac and Fox Indians, seven or eight hundred in number, under the lead of the chiefs *Powseheik*, *Shamonie*, and *Peta-co-tah*, having returned from the lands allotted to them west of the Missouri River, and taken possession of the country lying north of Marengo, on the Iowa River,

their chief village being at what is since called Indian Town. Three companies of troops—as follows: Company E and Company C, 6th U. S. Infantry, and Company B, 2d U. S. Dragoons—were ordered from Fort Snelling to remove these Indians, and deliver them to the commanding officer at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. After attending to that duty, Company B, 2d Dragoons, commanded by Lieut. Gardner, and Company C, Lieut. Johnston, returned to Fort Snelling, and Company E, U. S. 6th Infantry, were ordered, under command of Brevet Major Samuel Woods, to march to the Des Moines, to build and garrison the Fort on the site selected by General Mason. We took up the line of march from Camp *Buckner*, on the Iowa River, on the last day of July, 1850. Most of the officers and men of the detachment had served in Florida and Mexico; and when they started for the Des Moines, all believed, from the character given of the country they were ordered to, that they were again about to be stationed in a country similar to Florida—a country destitute of timber, and covered with lakes, ponds, and swamps; but they were very agreeably disappointed.

After a tedious march, having to bridge streams and sloughs, and pass a heavily-loaded train of wagons through an uninhabited country, we arrived at the Des Moines, at the point designated, on the evening of the 23d day of August, 1850, and encamped on the ground now lying between the Public Square and Walnut street, and between Fourth and Fifth streets, in Fort Dodge. Upon our arrival, all the Indians fled from the east to the west side of the Des Moines, and something like nine months elapsed before any of them ventured to come near us or communicate with us.

A commencement was made immediately to prepare the necessary materials for building and preparing for winter quarters. In the latter part of November the buildings were up, and generally so far finished as to enable the troops to move into them, when we struck our tents and took possession of them. In honor of General Clarke, then Colonel of the 6th Regiment U. S. Infantry, to which the troops belonged, the post was named "FORT CLARKE."

When we first came to this country, the whole northern and northwestern portion of Iowa was inhabited by the red man alone. Henry Lott, of whom I have before spoken, had found his way up as far as the mouth of Boon River (having fled from justice), but the Indians had driven him away, and he did not venture to return until he found the troops were on their way to establish a post on these frontiers.

THE FIRST SETTLERS FOUND IN WEBSTER COUNTY AFTER THE TROOPS ARRIVED—MAKING ROADS AND BUILDING THE FIRST BRIDGES—EXPLORATION OF THE COUNTY—ORGANIZATION OF THE COUNTY—CHANGES OF COUNTY BOUNDARIES—VALUATION OF TAXABLE PROPERTY—COUNTY SEATS—FIRST OFFICERS ELECTED FOR THE COUNTY, &c.

After the buildings were up, and getting into quarters, we spent some time in exploring the county south of Fort Dodge, with the view of making roads, building bridges, &c., to enable our wagon trains to get down to Keokuk and Muscatine on the Mississippi, for our supplies; when we found a few settlers near the mouth of Boon River, who, having learned that a military post was to be established in this section of the country, had pushed up and made claims and built their cabins previous to the time we arrived to build the fort. We there found the following persons, who had made claims and settled on what is called the Boon River fork; viz: Isaac Bell, Henry Lott, Francis McGuire, D. McGuire, Loudiwick Mericle, Jacob Mericle, D. B. Spalding, Osburn Brannan, and John Tolman, and their families. These were the first settlers in the district embraced in what is now Webster and Hamilton counties, who were not attached to the service at the Fort. There are now resident in the county of Webster men who were attached to the army and came here with the troops, who may justly claim to be amongst the very first settlers, namely: William Williams, James B. Williams, John M. Hefley, Thomas White, and James Mahoney. No white man was to be found east of the Fort until we reached the Cedar River, but one at Clear Lake. There we found a man named Hewett, living among the Indians and trading with them.

No white man north of us and none west until we reached the mouth of Big Sioux river. There we found the remains of an old trading post of the fur company, where several Frenchmen were living with the Indians and intermarried with them. The above named settlers on Boon River were the only white settlers we discovered for some time in this region of country. During the following year, 1851, several came in. So rapidly did the immigration put in along the road we made south of Iowa River, and to Des Moines, that Boon county was organized in 1850. Such was the effect of the establishment of this post (Fort Dodge), and stationing troops between both and the Indians. In 1851, a number of immigrants from Missouri settled in forks of the Boon and Des Moines River; among the number was Wm. Pierce, Tolman Wolsey, the Eslichs, and Howards.

The Legislature of Iowa, in session of 1850-51, arranged and laid out all the territory lying north and northwest of the State into counties, and named them. What is now Webster county was then named Yell county, and what is now named Hamilton county was named Risley. These counties were named after, or in honor of two colonels who fell in Mexico.

During the session of the Legislature of 1852-53, the settlers in Boon forks, the only settlers in the counties of Yell and Risloy, numbering about fifty, for the purpose of making for themselves a central point and secure a county seat, petitioned, and by false statements induced, the Legislature to pass a law uniting the two counties Yell and Risley in one county, which they named Webster county. In April, 1853, Webster County was organized, when fifty votes were polled. In August following seventy-six votes were polled. This election was the first county election in Webster County. The first county officials elected were, for County Judge, Wm. Pierce, Register and Recorder Tolman Wolsey; Clerk Jesse Goodrich, School Fund Commissioner, John Tolman, Sheriff; I. Doty; Justices of the Peace, Rev. John Johns and Loudwick Mericle; Constable, John Hefley; Township Clerk, Sherman Hart; Assessor, Samuel Esliche; County Surveyor, George Warner.

Then Washington township was organized, the only township organized in the county; it embraced the whole county. The valuation of the property in the county, exclusive of the United States property at the Fort, was, in 1850, \$40,000.

In August, 1853, Webster County had a population of about one hundred and fifty souls, all of whom were located in Boon Forks, about twenty miles south of the fort, (with the exception of six or eight at the fort) they formed a Republic of their own; law and justice was administered in their own way, every man studied the code of Iowa, and expounded the law to suit himself; the Rev. John Johns, the only divine amongst them preached and expounded the scriptures for them on the Sabbath day, when he was not too much engaged in bee hunting, deer hunting and trapping—making claims, selling them and hunting engaged the attention of most of these first settlers, many of them had claims for every member of the family, all felt rich in lands.

Homer was the first county seat of Webster County, and was located in the fall of 1853, situated near the Boon River, nineteen miles south of Fort Dodge. The first post office in the county was established at Homer. Granville Berkley, Post Master, the mail matter he kept in a trunk under his bed, the office was served once a week, carried on horse back; the troops at the garrison carried their own mail from Fort Desmoines.

THE FORT—TROOPS—OFFICERS AT THE FORT—CHANGE OF NAME FROM FORT CLARKE TO THAT OF FORT DODGE—DES MOINES RIVER GRANT—TROOPS ORDERED TO THE NORTH—FORT ABANDONED—FIRST SETTLERS NORTH OF THE FORT—FIRST BUILDING ERECTED IN FORT DODGE AFTER THE TROOPS LEFT—FIRST COURT HELD IN THE COUNTY—POST OFFICE ESTABLISHED—GOVERNMENT LAND OFFICE ESTABLISHED—COUNTY SEAT REMOVED TO FORT DODGE—COUNTY DIVIDED, AND THE PROGRESS OF THE COUNTY GENERALLY.

As already stated the troops arrived at the points selected on the evening of the 23d of August, 1850, and encamped on

the second bench of land on the east side of the Des Moines River, the right of the line resting near the south-east corner of the Public Square, as now laid out in the town plat of Ft. Dodge, the left resting near the corner of Walnut and Fifth streets, fronting west. On the approach of the troops the Indians all fled from the east to the west side of the river Des Moines. The troops were set to work immediately to cut timber and prepare the necessary material for building quarters. The Quartermaster as soon as possible brought on and put in motion a steam saw-mill, and great efforts were made to have the necessary buildings up and habitable before the winter would set in. They succeeded (by putting on temporary roofs) in making them habitable by the middle of November, when they struck their tents and took possession of the buildings. The garrison generally was composed of from 120 to 130, including officers, rank and file, women and children, and citizen mechanics employed. The troops stationed here were men who had served during the war with Mexico, and many of them in the Florida war. The officers were Brevet Maj. Samuel Woods, Brevet Maj. L. A. Armistead, acting as Commissary, Lieut. Stubbs, Lieut. L. S. Corley, Snrgeon, Doct. I. Keeney, (Maj. W. Williams acting as Sutler), Maj. Woods in command of the post. The buildings were arranged in line, as all when laying out the ground agreed in the opinion that at some future time a town of some importance would be built on the site selected, and for that reason arranged the buildings in the order they did in line, forming one side of a street.

In the spring of 1851 the men were put to fencing up and breaking ground for farming purposes, agreeably to the regulations adopted at out-posts; being required to raise their own supplies of corn, oats and vegetables.

In the fall of 1851, by order of the Secretary of War, the name of the Fort was changed from Fort Clarke to that of Fort Dodge, in honor of Gen. Henry Dodge, of Wisconsin, then U. S. Senator from that state. The change was made in consequence of a portion of the 6th regiment having built

a fort further west, and also named it Fort Clarke, which caused confusion in mail matters and in forwarding supplies. The military reservation intended for Fort Dodge, was four miles south and four miles north of the fort, along the Des Moines River, and two miles on each side of said river, making a strip of land eight miles long by four miles wide, but before it was distinctly surveyed and laid out, the decision was made that the Des Moines River Grant extended above Raccoon Fork to the source of the River Des Moines, giving every odd section to the State of Iowa for the improvement of the Des Moines River up to the Raccoon Fork. This decision interfered with the United States making such reservation, and when the lands were sectionized, it was found that the buildings and improvements of the fort were erected on a river section, being situated on Section No. 19, township 89, range 28 west.

At this post during the time they were stationed here, the troops were kept very busy in checking the Indians and preventing them from committing depredations on frontier settlers. They had in charge all the north, north-eastern and north-western frontiers, from the eastern part of the state to the Missouri River. An outfit of thirty men, mounted, was constantly kept in readiness to pursue the savages when an alarm was given, and a great part of the time kept men on the scout to watch their movements.

In 1853 the troops stationed at Fort Dodge were ordered to move 150 miles north in Minnesota, to build a new fort on the north line of the then new purchase made from the Sioux Indians, which has been built and named Fort Ridgely. In the latter part of September, 1853, the last division of the troops left, when the fort was abandoned. Maj. Wm. Williams quit the service with the view of purchasing the post site and adjoining lands.

PURCHASE OF THE FORT SITE AND ADJOINING LANDS—TOWN LAID OUT—FIRST SETTLERS IN TOWN OF FT. DODGE—FIRST SETTLERS NORTH OF FORT DOGE—ESTABLISHMENT OF POST OFFICE—GOVERNMENT LAND OFFICE—OTHER TOWNS LAID

OUT IN THE COUNTY—WEBSTER COUNTY DIVIDED—COUNTY OFFICERS—JUDGES OF DISTRICT COURT—NUMBER OF TOWNSHIPS IN THE COUNTY—MAIL ROUTES—VALUATION OF PROPERTY—NUMBER OF INHABITANTS—RAILROAD—COURT HOUSE—CONTRACTORS, &c., &c.

In January, 1854, Maj. W. Williams succeeded in purchasing the fort site for the Fort Dodge Company, composed of John Lemp, of Muscatine, Jesse Williams and Bernhart Hurse, of Fairfield, Iowa, who afterwards sold an interest to Geo. Gillaspy, of Ottumwa.

On the 27th of March, 1854, the first town plat was surveyed and laid out, including the fort buildings. After the troops abandoned the fort Maj. Williams, his son Jas. B. Williams, (a young boy), and Serg't John Heffley, a discharged soldier, were the only occupants for near two years. During that time the only settlers who were north of the fort was Wm. R. Miller and family, who had settled on a claim nine miles north. Henry Lott (who always kept on the extreme frontier,) had gone up and made a claim about thirty miles north of what is now called Lott's Creek. Asa C. Call, Esq., and his brother Ambrose Call, had made claims and settled forty miles north, where Algona is now situated. These were the first settlers north of Fort Dodge. After the troops had left for Minnesota the Indians began to close in again, and became impudent and troublesome; particularly so after Lott and his son murdered the Indian *Si-dom-i-na-do-tah* and his family, and fled from the country. They became very sullen and hostile. Soon after they drove Wm. R. Miller and family to the fort for shelter. In January, 1854, Lott committed this murder, and for some time we anticipated an attack from them every day. In the month of March and April some settlers came in, among whom was Preston Vancleave, John Vancleave, Volsey Knight, S. A. Scovel with their families, and settled in the fort. Robert Scott and John Scott, who had settled some distance below the fort, abandoned their claims and fled to the fort from fear of the Indians. Edward McKnight, Wm. Plumb, Cyrus C. Carpenter and Rob't John-

ston came in to settle; these were the first settlers at Fort Dodge after it was laid out as a town. In the latter part of April Jos. Sweets, J. Rensland and L. Kitzman, three discharged soldiers, returned to us; this gave us a force of about fifteen well armed men, which gave confidence to settlers that we could defend ourselves from any attack from the Indians. In the fall of 1854 a number of settlers came in and settled below us. In the fall 1854 a Post Office was established, and Wm. Williams was appointed postmaster. Congress in session of 1854-5 established a Government Land Office at the fort. In the spring of 1855 immigration increased rapidly; during that year there was quite an increase of population in Fort Dodge and in the northern part of the county. In September, 1855, the first building was erected outside of the line of the garrison buildings by Messrs. Gilmore and Chandler. In August, 1854, the first District Court was held at Homer, the county seat of Webster County, Judge C. I. McFarland, presiding, and Francis Esleck was the first District Clerk.

In May, 1854, the town of New Castle was laid out by Walter C. Wilson and Sumner Wilson. This town is situated on Boon River about twenty miles east of Fort Dodge on the road to Dubuque. In July, 1855, a number of immigrants having come in and settled in New Castle and its vicinity, this town was enlarged by additions and the name changed to Webster City. In June, 1855, Paris, a town on the south side of Boon River on the road to Des Moines, was laid out on the 5th day of November, 1855.

The Government Land Office was opened at Fort Dodge for the sale of Government Lands; Gen. Van Antwerp, Receiver, and Wm. H. Merritt, Register. The office was opened in the commissary building erected by the troops, situate on the corner of Second and Williams streets. The opening of the Land Office and sale of lands caused a great rush of speculators and buyers to come in. The population increased very rapidly in Fort Dodge and in the northern portion of the county during the following year, 1856. In April, 1856,

the county seat of Webster County was (by the voice of the people) removed from Homer to Fort Dodge. Same year additions were laid out and the town of Fort Dodge extended. Same year, July, 1856, the town of Border Plain was laid out by I. Engle and others, situated about ten miles south of Fort Dodge, on the east side of the Des Moines River. The east side of the Des Moines was first settled south of the fort; no settlements of any account were made on the west side until 1856. The east side of the river was first settled from the fact that the military made good roads and bridged the streams on that side, which had the effect to keep the travel on that side of the river. It was not long after that immigrants began to come in freely. In 1856 it was discovered that the land on the west side generally was superior to that on the east side, and it was rapidly settled upon by good farmers. Mills were erected and towns laid out. The town of Buchanan was laid out on the west side in June, 1856, situated about fifteen miles south of Fort Dodge. West Dayton, about twenty miles south of the fort, was laid out in August, 1856. Belleville, on the Des Moines, about eighteen miles south-east of the fort, was laid out in 1857. At the session of the legislature, 1856-7, Webster County was divided by striking off the territory formerly embraced in the old County of Risley, and formed a new county, which they named Hamilton. Webster City was made the county seat. At the same session the legislature added to Webster County part of what was originally Humboldt County; this left Webster County as it now stands, with the territory formerly embraced in Yell, with the addition of township No. 90 taken off Humboldt County, making the county twenty-four miles from east to west, and thirty miles from north to south. On July 31, 1856, the first newspaper was published, called the Fort Dodge Sentinel, edited by A. S. White.

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.