

A Brief History of Keokuk

The site of Keokuk was known by the fur traders and river men as "The Point" and by the Indians as "Puck-e-she-tuck," or "Foot of the Rapids."

The first white man to make a permanent settlement within the present limits of the city was Dr. Samuel C. Muir, who erected a log cabin in 1820 near the present junction of Main and Water streets. Dr. Muir was an Army surgeon stationed at Ft. Edwards, Illinois, now Warsaw, Illinois. His wife was a Sauk Indian and when the Army prohibited its men from marrying Indian women, he resigned from the Army and moved with his family to the present site of Keokuk. A few years later, Muir leased his claim to Otis Reynolds and John Culver, of St. Louis and they sent Moses Stillwell here to open a trading post.

Shortly after the arrival of Stillwell and his family, the American Fur Company operated a trading post which was housed in a row of five adjoining log houses. This row of houses stood for many years and was known as "Rat Row."

In 1829, a group of river men suggested that the settlement be named Keokuk, in honor of Chief Keokuk, a Sauk chief who was friendly with the white settlers. His remains were brought back later to the city and are interred in Rand Park beneath the stone pedestal and statue erected in his honor.

Dr. I. Galland laid out and plotted the original city in 1837, and the city was incorporated under a special charter in 1847.

A medical college that became the first medical department of the University of Iowa was established here in 1850 and was later moved to Iowa City.

During the Civil War, Keokuk was the embarkation point for most Iowa troops and for those of several neighboring states. The sick and wounded soldiers were returned to Keokuk for treatment and five hospitals were established to care for them. Later a National Cemetery, the only one in Iowa, was set aside to provide a burial ground for those who died in the hospitals.

For a number of years, titles to land in and around Keokuk were uncertain and it was not clear who held title to the land.

The southern half of Lee County was included in the Half-breed tract, and all of this land was involved in litigation. This land had been set aside for the use of the half-breed descendants of the trappers, settlers, half-breeds, and land speculators and it was not until a decree of partition was drawn in 1841 that the question of the land titles was settled. This decree of partition was upheld by the courts and became the basis for all the land titles in Keokuk. Francis Scott Key, author of "The Star Spangled Banner," was said to have helped draw the decree of partition, as attorney for the New York Land Company. Many able lawyers were drawn to Keokuk during the "Half-breed" controversy and a number of them stayed and later attained prominence nationally.

For many years, river traffic was unable to pass over to the rapids extending for 11 miles above Keokuk, making it necessary to unload all freight and haul it by wagon, or lighten it in smaller boats over the rapids. Because of this transfer of cargo, at Keokuk, the city became known as "The Gate City." The rapids in the Mississippi were such a serious hindrance to navigation that the Federal Government in 1877 built a canal thus making through traffic from the lower to the upper river possible. This canal was nine miles long, 250 feet wide and had a depth of five feet. Three locks permitted raising boats from the lower to the upper river past the rapids. This cost was \$7,500,000.

In 1910-1913, the Mississippi River Power Co., constructed a dam across the river, from Keokuk to Hamilton, Illinois. The dam is 640 feet long and contains 119 arch spans. The powerhouse is 1,712 feet long and 117 feet high. Total capacity of the powerhouse is in excess of 130,000 kw. In addition to power furnished to Keokuk homes and industries, power is carried to surrounding communities by transmission lines. Power is also furnished to the city of St. Louis and the plant is owned by the Union Electric Company of St. Louis. In the early days, Keokuk was the jobbing headquarters of the middle west. With changing conditions, it no longer served as a wholesale center, but has become an important manufacturing center, its chief products being cereals, carbide, steel castings, rubber products, ferro-alloys for steel manufacturers and fiber containers.

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