


VAN BUREN COUNTY.

SOME NOTES OF ITS EARLY HISTORY.

BY A. R. FULTON.

 SEPTEMBER 6, 1834, the Sixth Legislative Council of the "Territory of Michigan," passed, at its extra session, "An Act, to lay off and organize counties west of the Mississippi river." This legislation created the counties of Dubuque and Des Moines. What is now the State of Wisconsin was then "Iowa County," and its laws, as far as applicable, were extended over the new counties west of the Mississippi.

June 15, 1836, Michigan became a State, and under an act of Congress of April 20, of the same year, Wisconsin, with the country west of the Mississippi river, became, on the 4th of July, a territorial organization. The first legislature of the new territory was held at Belmont, near the ancient town of Mineral Point, in November, 1836. The third act passed by this legislature was one dividing the county of Des Moines into Lee, Van Buren, Des Moines, Henry, Louisa and Muscatine. The limits of Van Buren county at that time extended westward indefinitely, or at least as far as the Indian title had been extinguished.

On the 10th of April, 1837, the first court in Van Buren county was organized at Farmington, on the Des Moines river. Hon. David Irvin, Judge of the Second Judicial District of Wisconsin, presided. A grand jury was impaneled, and several indictments were returned, one of which was against N. Doose, for exercising the office of Constable in the county, by authority of the State of Missouri. That State claimed, and assumed jurisdiction over a strip of territory which was subsequently decided to belong to Iowa. The next court was also held at Farmington, in April, 1838, the same judge presiding. At

this court Charles Mason was appointed Prosecuting Attorney, *pro tem.*, for the county. A petit jury was impaneled to try an indictment for house-breaking. The party was found guilty, and fined *fifteen dollars*. About this time, or shortly after, commenced a controversy about the permanent location of the county seat. Numerous towns had been laid out and most of them were competitors for the honors. Among them may be mentioned Keosauqua, Pittsburg, Philadelphia, Rochester, Columbus, Rockport, Bentonsport, Lexington, Farmington and Utica—all towns at one time in Van Buren county. Some of them it would be difficult to find at the present day. By an act of the First Territorial Legislature of Iowa, approved January 25, 1839, Benjamin F. Chastain of Jefferson county, Michael H. Walker of Lee county, and Stephen Gearhart of Des Moines county, were appointed Commissioners to locate the county seat. The same legislature had previously passed an act making the location at Rochester, but Governor Lucas had vetoed the bill. The new bill appointing commissioners, also provided for holding the first term of the District Court, after its passage, at Keosauqua, but said court forever after was to be held at the place selected by the commissioners.

Keosauqua was selected by the commissioners as the future county seat. It was then a village of some promise, situated on the north bank of the Des Moines river, at the lower extremity of a peninsula, in what was known as the "Great Bend," and supposed to be admirably situated as a trading and manufacturing point, as it possessed an excellent landing for steamboats, and good water-power. The first white man who settled on the spot where this town is situated, was one John Silvers, who in 1835, made a claim and built a cabin on the bank of the river. About the same time several other persons settled in the vicinity, among them, E. Pardom, Isaac W. McCarty, John Patchett, and John Tolman with his Indian wife. Silvers sold his claim in the fall of 1836 to Meschack Sigler for \$300. Mrs. Sigler was the first white woman who made her home at

the place. In 1837, a company styled the "Van Buren Company," purchased of Mr. Sigler his claim. This company was composed of James Hall, James Manning, Edwin Manning, John J. Fairman, John Carnes and Robert Taylor. Sigler subsequently became one of the company, and Taylor sold his interest to William Billups and Simon Druiland.

In 1837 the "Van Buren Company" laid out a portion of the town of Keosauqua, and in the Spring of 1839 the rest of the town was surveyed and recorded. The company built the first house in 1837, and in this Carnes and Fairman kept the first store. John J. Fairman was the first postmaster, the office being called Portoro. At the land sales in Burlington, in 1838, James Hall was authorized by the company to purchase in his own name the tract of land on which the town of Keosauqua was located. The next year the first brick house was built by Edward R. Tylee. In 1838, T. Lane opened the first talior shop, and the next year formed a partnership with J. J. Kimersley. The first physician was Dr. Cyrus H. Ober, and the first lawyer Isaac F. Lewis. The first hotel was kept by Elisha Puett, in a one story log house. The landlord subsequently went to Texas. The first blacksmith was David Smith.

In April, 1839, R. King laid out what was called "Des Moines City," immediately below, and adjoining Keosauqua. Here a flouring mill was erected. At this point a dam was built across the river, and a stone flouring mill built. In the fall of 1839 the first steamboat ascended the Des Moines river as far up as Keosauqua—the adventurous craft being the "S. B. Science," Capt. Clarke, Master. She brought goods for the Indian trading posts above, as well as flour, pork and other necessary articles for the settlers. It is said there was also a liberal invoice of *scuti-appo* (whisky) for both whites and Indians.

About this time an affair of honor transpired between two of the settlers, A. W. Marlan and one Bushnell. Russo King and Mr. Sigler were the seconds. Pistols were the weapons chosen,

but fortunately no shooting occurred. Their friends induced them to settle the difficulty by the less dangerous method now practiced by the *ring*. Harlan came off the victor, and thus ended the first and perhaps the last, appeal to the "Code of Honor" in Van Buren county.

The first white child born in Keosauqua was a daughter to William Billups, and the first marriage solemnized was that of Lewis Laplant and Nancy Hill, January 28, 1838, by Benjamin F. Green, a justice of the peace. The first newspaper was commenced in the Summer of 1843, by Jesse M. Shepherd and John T. Mitchell. It was called the "*Iowa Democrat and Des Moines River Intelligencer*."

The first town in Iowa bearing the name of "Iowa City" was not that which is located in Johnson county, for on the 25th of January, 1839, certain commissioners were appointed to "review, lay out and establish a territorial road from Mt. Pleasant to Rome in Henry county, and thence to Lockridge, thence to Smith's Crossing on Big Cedar, in Jefferson county, and thence to Iowa City in Van Buren county."

Another important point in the early days of Van Buren county was a place known as Iowaville (Iowa City?) located on the north bank of the Des Moines river, and near the northwest corner of the county. It was a trading post for the Sac and Fox Indians, and at one time the home of the celebrated Chief Keokuk. Here was fought between the Sacs and Foxes and Iowa tribe of Indians that most decisive battle which resulted in the defeat of the Iowas and the supremacy of the united Sacs and Foxes in southern Iowa. The ruins of Keokuk's old house were still visible a few years ago near the west limits of the village of Iowaville. The embankment which was thrown up around his lodge, was examined by the writer in 1868. The form of the enclosure was elliptical, and measured 90 feet north and south, by 160 feet east and west. There was a gate-way on the south side, facing the river. A few feet from the west end of this enclosure were buried the remains of a son

of Keokuk, a youth of 19 years of age, who died in the fall of 1837, while the chief was absent in Washington. The young Indian's favorite horse was shot and buried here with its owner.

In 1839 a conflict arose between the State of Missouri and the territory of Iowa, relative to a strip of land lying along the border north of the present State line. Missouri claimed that the "Des Moines Rapids" mentioned in her State Constitution as a point in her northern boundary, referred to the rapids in the Des Moines river about where Keosauqua is located. Iowa claimed that the "Des Moines Rapids" in the Mississippi were the rapids that were meant. Both the State of Missouri and the Territory of Iowa claimed jurisdiction over the disputed strip of territory. So intense was the feeling that a martial spirit began to be developed. Troops were organized, but history informs us of no more bloodless war than the one which ensued. In this war Van Buren county was especially conspicuous. Some of her citizens acquired great distinction as officers, and among them may be mentioned Capt. J. H. Bonney. After a manifestation of the most undoubted pluck and heroism on the part of the Iowa troops, and the exhaustion of the commissary supplies on both sides, peace was proclaimed, the enemy having concluded to submit her claim to the decision of the courts. The tract was finally adjudged as belonging to Iowa, and thus ended the first war in which Iowa, and especially Van Buren county, acquired military laurels!

Few, if any, of the counties of Iowa are more conspicuous in early territorial legislation than Van Buren. By an act approved January 15, 1839, "The Des Moines Mill Company" was incorporated, in which William Duncan and his associates were authorized to construct a dam across the river at a certain point named. The bill stipulated that they should build a lock not less than 130 feet long and 35 feet wide, for the passage of "steam, keel, flat-boats, rafts, and other water-crafts." This was the beginning of Iowa legislation concerning the Des Moines river, and which proved a prolific subject of legislation

for many years. An act approved January 19, 1839, also incorporates "The Plymouth Mill and Manufacturing Company," and authorized E. B. Kimbrell, H. King, Lewis R. Bissell, Martin A. Britton, and E. A. Swasey, and their associates, to construct a dam across the Des Moines river at a certain point in Van Buren county, with the same restrictions as in the other bill. An act of the same legislature was approved January 23, 1839, "establishing" at different points 12 seminaries of learning, three of which were in Van Buren county. One, styled "The Farmington Academy," was to be at the town of Farmington. Henry Bateman, Martin A. Britton, John Crane, Stephen Mills, and their associates, were the incorporators. Another institution styled "The Bentonsport Academy," was to be established in the "town of north or south Bentonsport," as a majority of the citizens of the town might decide. "South Bentonsport" is now known as Vernon. The incorporators were S. Richards, G. W. Howe, H. P. Graves, H. Buckland, Bertrand Jones, Henry Smith, and their associates. Still another institution was located at Keosauqua, called "The Keosauqua Academy." The incorporators were J. N. Lewis, C. H. Ober, John Carnes, John Fairman, S. W. Summers, James Hall, Wilson Stanley, and their associates. All these institutions were declared in the act of incorporation as being for "the instruction of young persons of both sexes in science and literature." The same Territorial Legislature, in January, 1839, authorized William Meek & Sons to construct a dam at Bonaparte; and Henry Eno, George W. Howe and Seth Richards, one at Bentonsport, with the usual clause guarding the navigation of the river by the construction of locks, etc.



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