

## The Beginnings of Burlington

When the Black Hawk Purchase was opened to settlers in 1833, there grew up at Flint Hills a settlement which took the name Burlington and became a thriving village and an important ferry crossing. In 1837 the legislature of the Territory of Wisconsin met there and a year later the town became the seat of government for the newly created Territory of Iowa. In 1839 a site was chosen for a new capital to be known as Iowa City, but the legislature continued to meet at Burlington until 1841. The story of the first decade, told at the time by the participants in the events, is available to us because there were newspapers in the early days, and a few men far-sighted enough to preserve the yellowing files.

### THE EARLY THIRTIES

In the issues of *The Iowa Patriot* for June 6 and June 13, 1839, "A Citizen of Burlington"—undoubtedly William R. Ross—wrote the two following historical sketches:

"MR. EDWARDS<sup>1</sup>—At your request and believing that a brief sketch of the first settlement of our

<sup>1</sup> James G. Edwards commenced the publication of the *Burlington Patriot* in the year 1838. In 1839 he took the name *The Iowa Patriot*, which title was later changed to the *Hawk-Eye and Iowa Patriot*, then to the *Hawk-Eye*. The newspaper is at present issued under the title *The Burlington Hawk-Eye*.

country would be interesting to the readers of your paper, I communicate the following:— I arrived at what was formerly called the upper end of Flint Hills, now the City of Burlington, in August, A. D. 1833, at which time every thing was in a rude state of nature; the Indian title of these lands being only extinguished the first of June previous. The only white persons that I found residing on or near the place on which Burlington has since been laid out, were Messrs. M. M. McCarver and S. S. White, who had ventured here, previous to the extinguishment of the Indian title, with their families, suffering all the privations and difficulties attending the settlement of a wilderness country, which were very great and not a few of them. Frequently without bread or meat, only such as the God of Nature supplied the country bountifully with, wild honey, venison, fish and vegetables, in addition to which they were driven from their newly finished cabin, which was fired and burnt down by the soldiers from Rock Island, as ordered by the Government to remove the settlers from lands yet owned by the Indians. Much credit is due these citizens for their enterprize, having made the first claim, and established the first ferry that enabled emigrants to cross the great Mississippi to this newly favored land, and in endeavoring to make them as comfortable as circumstances would admit. A short period after they had made their claim they sold one third of their interest to Mr. A. Doolittle, who went on to improve, but did

not become a citizen until the early part of the year 1834. In the fall of A. D. 1833, Wm R. Ross brought a valuable stock of goods here, with his household furniture at great hazard and much expense, accompanied by his aged Father, who had fought throughout the Revolutionary war, and who was one of the first settlers of Lexington, Ky. Worn down with toil and age, and being exposed to the inclemencies of a new home, the old gentleman was carried off the same fall with chills and fever, and now lies beneath the clod on the topmost pinnacle of our City; the first white person buried in this section of the 'New Purchase.'

“Late in the same fall Major Jeremiah Smith landed with a fine stock of Goods, having sometime previously settled and improved the farm on which he at present resides, about one and a half miles from Burlington. Having given a history of all the permanent settlers of what is now called Burlington, in 1833, I will now relate a few circumstances concerning the natives. Burlington had long been a great point of trade for the Indians, as would appear from the numerous old trading houses, root house, and number of graves that were all along the bank of the river, together with several that were deposited in canoes with their trinkets, and suspended in the trees; the canoes being made fast to the limbs by strips of bark. Among the rest was the noted French or half breed, M. Blondeau, who was interred immediately in front of the old store-

house of S. S. Ross, with paling around his grave, and the cross with his name cut thereon, he being a Roman Catholic. We had his remains removed and re-interred in the present burying ground for Burlington. Their trade was somewhat valuable to the merchants in 1833, but Government having purchased all their lands within our present surveyed boundary, and their natures and habits of life being so different from that of a civilized community they have entirely removed beyond our western boundary, still pursuing the wild game for a livelihood.

“The original town of Burlington (which should have been called Shok-ko-kon, the English of the Indian title Flint Hill) was draughted and surveyed by Benjamin Tucker and Wm. R. Ross in the months of November and December, 1833. As I have been more lengthy than I expected in the outset, I will endeavor, in as concise a manner as the nature of the case will admit, to detail a few particulars in regard to the settlement of the country by that worthy class of our community — the Farmers, who deserve the greatest applause for their unexampled industry and perseverance.

“In October, A. D. 1832, there were some twelve or fifteen individuals who crossed the river in canoes, at the head of the Big Island, and landed at the claim of the Messrs Smith, two miles below Burlington, and made an excursion a few miles around the edge of the timber in the town prairie; laying claims for future settlement. But little was done by them

until February, 1833; when they brought over their stock, and commenced building and cultivating the soil; but to their great detriment and suffering, they were driven by the Government Soldiers from Rock Island, across the river to the Big Island, taking with them their implements of husbandry and their stock. Their cabins and fencing were set on fire and entirely consumed. Notwithstanding all this and still resolved to hold on to their new homes, they held a council and it was pretty unanimously agreed by vote, to strike their tents and build a flat boat to enable them to cross over the river as opportunity served, to pursue the culture and improvement of their claims. Many of these worthy individuals, after making a small improvement, have sold out at a trifling advance, to such as were more able and preferred buying, to going back and taking up wild lands and improving them. There yet remain a few families of those that first settled here, who have deeds for their lands from Government; their farms being now under a high state of cultivation.

“Being already too lengthy I defer giving you the extent of improvement made by some of the settlers in 1833, but will say it was from ten to fifty acres in corn, and as the by-laws were enacted in the fall of 1833, for regulating the manner of improving and holding claims, I will refer you to them for names and particulars.”

“MR. EDITOR,— I am in hopes, Sir, that number

two will be somewhat more interesting to your readers than the former number, as attention to the Black-Hawk country became more generally excited in 1834. After a close, hard winter the river remaining blocked over until late in the spring, when Steam Boats began to ascend, prospects began to brighten. We however enjoyed ourselves through the winter very comfortably with our native friends in smoking the pipe, and talking over old war skirmishes, and having a chase almost every day with our dogs after the wolves that would appear opposite our village on the river. I recollect well on one morning there appeared five or six wolves on the river; we gave chase, and with fair running one of our dogs overhauled and killed three wolves before we reached him, and then put in pursuit of a fourth, but was so exhausted when we overtook him, about two miles above here among the Islands, that he could not keep his hold, and the wolf disappeared after the loss of much blood; the dog belonged to Mr Isaac Crenshaw, our worthy friend, who had previously settled the Barrett farm, and was one of those sufferers by the soldiers from Rock Island. Notwithstanding we were, as supposed and expressed by some individuals, beyond the Government of the United States, without Law or Gospel, we were governed by that principle which reigns in the breast of every American Citizen, to do unto others as we would wish they should do unto us; and among other particulars I would notice in passing, that

there were a few of the fair sex who attracted the notice of the boys, but the query was, how could the nuptials be performed? As for my own part, I was willing to be governed by the custom that prevailed, but not being satisfactory to all parties, we crowded the flat boat and paddled over the river to the opposite shore, and there saw the ceremony performed by Judge —— of Monmouth, Ill., which was on the third December, A. D. 1833. The parties were Wm. R. Ross and Matilda Morgan, I presume the first couple that were united in wedlock in the Black Hawk Purchase. In the Spring of 1834, we petitioned the Post Master General for a special office to be established at Burlington, recommending Wm. R. Ross for P. M.; our wishes were gratified, but the P. M. at Shok-ko-kon P. O. refused giving up the law, books, lock, key, &c.; his excuse was that he had no right to send the mail out of the United States; it would be malfeasance in office; but by hard persuasion he established a branch of his office at Burlington, receiving the profits of the same, and appointing Wm. R. Ross, Deputy, at whose expense the mail was carried once a week for six months; until he was ordered by the proper department to give up the packages or he would be removed from office.

“In the spring of 1834, the Black Hawk Purchase was attached to the Territory of Michigan for Judicial purposes, and divided into two Counties, Dubuque and Des Moines; Dubuque included all the country north of a line due west from the lower end

of Rock Island; Des Moines, the remainder of the country south of said line, to the Missouri line. The same Spring public documents were sent Wm. R. Ross from the Legislature of Michigan at Detroit, containing instructions to notify the citizens throughout the county to hold elections for their officers; elections took place accordingly in the fall, but it was sometime in the winter before we could have a return of our commissioners, at which time there being no sworn officer in the Government, Wm. R. Ross being instructed as Clerk, swore the Supreme Judge into office; and he in turn swore him and the other officers to faithfully and impartially discharge the duties of their offices. In this way the wheels of Government were put in motion in Black Hawk purchase; however, there was no court held or any business done of consequence until the Spring of 1835.

“In the fall of 1833 there was a school house built by Wm. R. Ross, on his claim immediately back and adjoining the town claim, as originally laid out; and a school went into operation in the Spring of 1834, of about sixteen or eighteen scholars, taught by Zadok C. Inghram. . . . We were likewise supplied in 1834 with a minister from Illinois; specially licensed by Elder Peter Cartright; his name was Barton Cartright, a young man of promise; we were also visited in the summer by Elder P. Cartright, W. D. R. Trotter, and Asa McMurtry, who held a two days meeting and preached under a shady

Grove, where there was a stand erected and seats prepared by the friends; all classes uniting in the worship of Almighty God.

“In regard to improvements in 1834, we had some accessions to our village of very good citizens, and several frame and log buildings were erected, but our farmers went far ahead in improvement of any people I ever saw who were laboring under the same disadvantages; every one was trying to excel, who should make the largest improvement and plant the most grain. I scarcely know of one but what broke thirty acres of Prairie, many of them fifty or sixty, and Wm. R. Ross broke eighty acres and planted the whole of it in Corn and Pumpkins, he commenced in April, and finished planting the twentieth of June; the last planting made the best corn. Those who had the largest improvements and who had to stand the brunt of hardships in the first settlement were Wm. Stewart, Richard Land, Wm. Morgan, Lewis Walters, Isaac Canterbury, E. Smith, Paris Smith, P. D. Smith, Isaac Crenshaw, B. B. Tucker, E. Wade and Father, and some few others, who have sold out and gone farther west, or left the country; and a few that have died; these were John Harris and William Wright, and no doubt some few that have slipped my memory.”

#### A DESTRUCTIVE FIRE

During the night of December 12, 1837, fire broke out in the building which Jeremiah Smith had built

for the accommodation of the legislature of the Territory of Wisconsin. It spread to other buildings and proved disastrous, as the account given by the *Wisconsin Territorial Gazette and Burlington Advertiser* for December 16, 1837, clearly shows:

“Wednesday last was a sad day for Burlington, and long will it be rememered in sorrow. Its matin light opened upon the ruins of the fairest portion of our village; and now the Capitol, and five of our best store houses, and two groceries, are piles of smouldering ruins. The whole of the block of buildings on Front street, from the corner of Lamson & Girvan up to the Post Office, is totally destroyed, embracing the store houses of Lamson & Girvan, Chase & Kimball, J. Newhall & Co., George W. Kelley, Jeremiah Smith, and the State House. Little merchandise, comparatively speaking, was destroyed by the fire, owing to the active exertions of our citizens, members of the Legislature and strangers; but, nevertheless, much of it was greatly injured by the hasty removal. The immediate loss of property is estimated at \$20,000, but it must, eventually prove to be far beyond that sum. The store houses destroyed were among the best buildings in the town; and the Capitol, recently finished, cost Major Smith \$7,000. It was a spacious building, and very well adapted to its uses. Thus, in a few short hours, has our thriving town met with a disaster which months and months cannot repair, and which, for the present and time to come, will press heavily upon some of our

enterprising and worthy citizens. There is, however, a buoyancy and elastic spirit, and an active enterprise among our people, which will, we feel confident, sustain them in this emergency, and which in the end will bring them triumphantly out of all difficulties. The fire originated in the second story of the Capitol; from, it is believed, a defectiveness in the hearth, by means of which it was communicated to the beams and timber. It was first discovered about 2 o'clock in the morning by the engineer of the steamboat Smelter, which was then lying at the wharf nearly opposite the scene of devastation. The progress the fire had made before our citizens got the alarm, the difficulty of getting at the fire, and our total destitution of engines or fire apparatus, gave the flames an easy triumph over every exertion that was made to arrest their progress; and it was, therefore, soon found to be idle to attempt it. Every exertion was then made to save the furniture of the capitol, and the goods and merchandise of those stores which were in danger, and which were finally destroyed. These efforts, as we have said, were very successful, but still many articles were destroyed, which, from their weight and situation, could not well be removed at the time. Some of the merchants who suffered by this fire have already made arrangements to pursue their business in other houses; others, we fear, will not be able to do so, and will have to store away their goods as well as they can, till they get proper rooms, or till they shall be en-

abled to rebuild next spring. At this season of the year, nothing in that way can be done; and from the fact that every house is bespoken almost as soon as it is begun, and filled before it is finished, it is greatly to be apprehended that suitable rooms cannot now possibly be obtained.

“The Council, for want of a better place, now holds its sessions in the west room of the upper story of the house occupied by the editors of this paper; and the House of Representatives is comfortably quartered in the upper story of Webber & Remey’s new building.”

#### IN THE EARLY FORTIES

An unknown writer, who signed his name “Veritas”, contributed to the *Hawk-Eye* for September 7, 1843, an interesting account of conditions in Burlington at the close of its first decade:

“In No. 7, I promised to give the statistics of Burlington in the present number. A stranger would not fail to be much surprised at the appearance of this place, when he would reflect that only a few years ago the Iowa country was owned and possessed by savage tribes of Indians, with the great Black Hawk as their head chief. The Territory was only organized under a territorial form of government by Congress in the year 1838. The temporary seat of Government for the Territory was placed at Burlington, but has since been removed to Iowa City.— Burlington is the largest town in the Terri-

tory, and is situated upon the west bank of the Mississippi River, in Fractional Townships 69 and 70 N. R. 2 West, and extends one mile along the River and one half mile back. The town — now city — was laid off in 1834. The first sale of lots was in 1841. The present population is about 2000. The City is incorporated, and is under good regulation of city police. One Mayor and eight Aldermen compose the city council. The city is also the county seat of Des Moines county, which contains a population of 8,500. The buildings are generally good. Good building rock of a superior quality is very abundant here, some of the houses are built of rock. The city contains thirty dry goods stores, twelve groceries, twenty ware houses, three iron stores, one iron foundry, four drug stores, nine doctors, twenty-eight lawyers, four black smith shops, two saddleries, three bake shops; three brick yards, which give employment to forty hands, twenty bricklayers, twelve stone cutters, tailors, carpenters and house Joiners, ad infinitum, two printing offices, three livery stables, one post office, six stage routes coming into the city. Times are said to be hard here, and money scarce. The currency is made up of Missouri, Wisconsin, Indiana, Kentucky and Ohio bank notes, and a very fair proportion of specie, and some times the yellow Benton boys, alias mint drops, are seen flowing up the river, and shining through the interstices of the silken purses; but these sights are somewhat rare, and like Angel's visits, few and far between. In fact

there is not one half of the money in circulation here, that ought to be, for this city is the great point of attraction, for the whole western world, and will shortly be the younger sister of St. Louis, and, if Congress would grant an appropriation to clear out the rapids below this place, which is hoped will be done, she will one day be the rival of the Missouri Mistress. There is one of the best landings for Steam Boats here of any place on the Upper Mississippi. Notwithstanding the hardness of the times, the city is improving rapidly and presents a fine, thriving appearance. Last season about eighty buildings were erected within her corporation, and about as many more have been erected this season. The bluffs here are very high, and the city is in no danger of ever being overflowed by the river.— The conveniences and facilities for slaughtering and packing pork, are as great here as any other place in the west. The Steam Ferry Boat at this place, called the Shockoquon, owned by Thurston and Webb, is safe and good for movers and others going to Iowa to cross upon. Her age is about four years. Her keel is one hundred feet, her beam twenty-five feet, her guards ten feet. She has two engines of thirty horse power each, she is well manned, and is safe and speedy in crossing. The rates of Ferriage are fixed by law and never exceeded in any case. In fact, though the rates of ferriage are raised by law, when the river is out of its bank, and the ferrying is then about five miles down to a little village on the east

bank of the river, yet such is the generosity of the owners of this boat, that they do not charge any higher rates at one time than another. The rates are as follows:

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| For two horses and a wagon, and their load,          | \$1.00 |
| For each additional pair of horses or oxen,          | 25     |
| For a carriage and one horse,                        | 75     |
| “ man and horse,                                     | 25     |
| “ foot passenger,                                    | 13     |
| “ each head of loose cattle                          | 13     |
| “ “ head of sheep and hogs, (sucklings<br>excepted,) | 6      |

“Where there is a large lot of stock, wagons, &c. ferried over at one time, a liberal deduction is made from those rates.

“The route from the central parts of Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio, to the Des Moines, Skunk and Big Cedar settlements in Iowa, is direct by the way of Burlington. The country east and west of this place is well settled; and accommodations for travelers are good for western fare. The crossing at the Prophet's town is too low down the river, and throws the travel to Iowa too far south, and in the half breed tract of country, where the roads are broken and rough. Those going to the north part of Missouri, would have a tolerably direct route by crossing at Nauvoo. I will give the routes and distances from the principal starting points to Iowa via Burlington in my next number as my sheet is filled.”