

Napoleon on the Frontier

On the second day of the special session of the Wisconsin Territorial Legislature, June 12, 1838, John Foley of Dubuque County arose in the Council and "presented the petition of citizens of Johnson county, asking to be organized as a separate county, and to establish the seat of justice for said county at or in the town of Napoleon." Immediately the proposal was sent to "a select committee consisting of the whole delegation from the original county of Dubuque"—John Foley and Thomas McCraney. Johnson County had been created by law on December 21, 1837, but no authority to elect officers had been granted and so local government had not been established.

Late in the afternoon of June 14th Mr. Foley from "the select committee" reported "A bill for an act organizing the county of Johnson, and establishing the seat of justice of said county." Four days later the Council approved the measure and sent it to the House of Representatives where it was promptly passed on June 20th. This statute, approved by Governor Henry Dodge, provided that Johnson County should be organized "from and after the fourth day of July", 1838.

The county was to remain a part of the second judicial district and court was to be held "at the town of Napoleon the seat of justice, at the court house, or such other place as may be provided."

What lay behind this legislative action? What was the history of this settlement on the Iowa frontier? How did the place come into being? Why was it made the seat of justice?

On the banks of the Iowa River, not far from the site that was to become Iowa City, was the Indian village of chiefs Poweshiek and Wapashashiek. After the Black Hawk War, Poweshiek had moved his Fox band from the Mississippi to the east side of the Iowa River just beyond Keokuk's Reserve. There John Gilbert of the American Fur Company went to trade.

John Gilbert was a man "above the average of men in scholarly acquirements and business capacity." Born in New York he was early interested in the building of canals, but when he lost heavily in this venture he resolved to go west and forget. Changing his name from John W. Prentice to John Gilbert, he entered the employ of the American Fur Company. Sent to establish Indian outposts, he found his way into the Iowa country about 1826.

Thus, John Gilbert was the first white man to settle in Johnson County. Charles Negus, an

early Iowa historian, located the trading house of the American Fur Company as being "established in the southeast part of the county, on the Iowa river, in Keokuk's reserve, near the western line of the first purchase." Thus, it seems that this first trader's cabin was adjacent to the Indian village close to the Iowa River near the mouth of Gilbert (Synder) Creek and about five miles below the present location of Iowa City.

In 1836, Gilbert went to Fort Armstrong to attend the drafting of the Indian Treaty surrendering the lands in Keokuk's Reserve. While there the fur trader met two young men — Philip Clark and Eli Myers — and persuaded them to return with him to the newly acquired territory. The two pioneers were pleased with the Iowa Valley and staked out claims for future homes. Presently other settlers began to arrive. By May, 1838, Johnson County had a population of 237.

Meanwhile, in the spring of 1837, John Gilbert decided to leave the employ of the American Fur Company and to go into business for himself. "Accordingly, about the first of July, he gathered up all the young men that had come in, and were without employment, to help him build a house." The building was of the double cabin type with one of the rooms for store purposes which was constructed "by chinking and daubing the cracks,

laying down a very strong floor of slabs, and making a very strong door, and a rough but strong counter, store-fashion." Each cabin was said to be about twenty feet square.

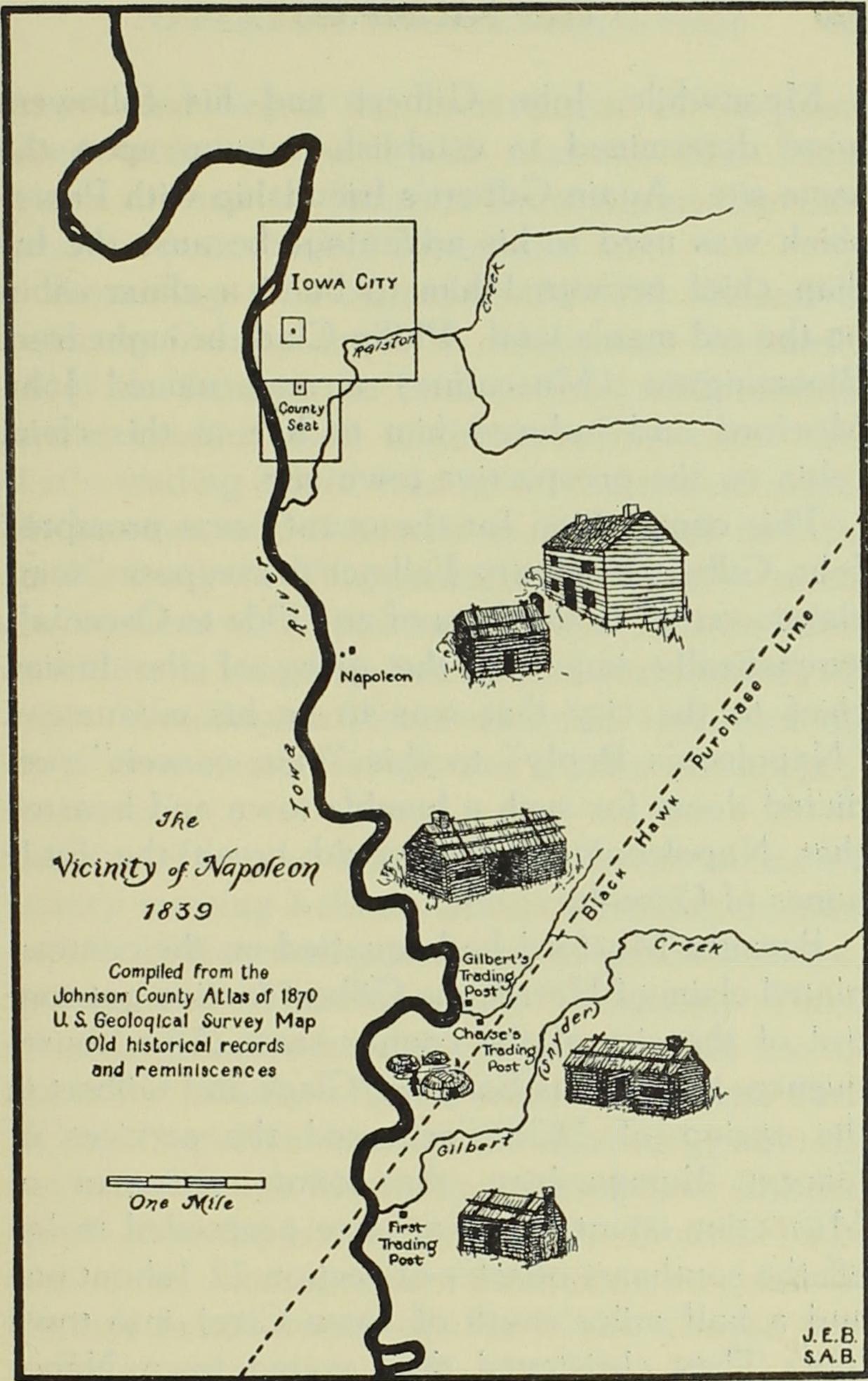
Having won Poweshiek's friendship, John Gilbert was permitted for two barrels of whisky to build his new cabin on Indian land. This trading post was approximately a mile and a quarter north of the original cabin. Cyrus Sanders said the "house was built nearly on the south line of Lucas township". He further explained that "at that time the land was owned by the Indians (the boundary line running in a southwest direction, and passing a short distance south of the house)." It appears that this cabin was near the river a short distance north of the mouth of a small creek and in the present East Lucas Township.

Soon after John Gilbert left the employ of the American Fur Company, Wheaten Chase came from a trading post on the Cedar River to handle the company's business in Johnson County. Interested in watching the activities of the independent fur trader, Chase abandoned the original cabin and located near Gilbert's trading post. On the south side and a little farther up the creek, probably within a quarter of a mile of Gilbert's house, Chase built his trading post, probably in the summer of 1837. This double cabin stood for

many years on the Byington farm, just over the line in Pleasant Valley Township. These two cabins became the focus of pioneer politics in Johnson County.

Early in 1838 the settlers of Johnson County began to be interested in organizing the local government and locating the seat of justice. On January 8th a group of pioneers (Pleasant Harris, I. N. Lesh, Eli Myers, John Gilbert, Henry Felkner, an Indian squaw named Jenny, and a negro called Mogawk) met at Gilbert's trading post and drafted resolutions asking the Territorial Legislature for roads, bridges, and mail facilities. John Gilbert and Pleasant Harris walked to Burlington through snow two feet deep to present the petition, but the lawmakers ignored their request.

Tradition adds that both Pleasant Harris and John Gilbert desired to promote the town which was to become the county seat of justice. Judge Harris had brought from Indiana a city plat. This paper town, which he called Osceola, was to be located on the Iowa River near Gilbert's new trading house. As soon as the Indian title to the land beyond Keokuk's Reserve was extinguished the Harris family planned to move into the fertile section and establish a town, probably on the level prairie near the river about three miles north of Gilbert (Snyder) Creek.



*The
Vicinity of Napoleon
1839*

Compiled from the
Johnson County Atlas of 1870
U.S. Geological Survey Map
Old historical records
and reminiscences

One Mile

J.E.B.
S.A.B.

Meanwhile, John Gilbert and his followers were determined to establish a town upon the same site. Again Gilbert's friendship with Poweshiek was used to his advantage because the Indian chief permitted him to build a claim cabin on the red man's land. Philip Clark brought from Bloomington (Muscatine) a man named John Morford and induced him to live in this claim cabin on the prospective town site.

This competition for the county seat prompted John Gilbert or Henry Felkner to compose "some classic verse" in the form of an "Ode to Osceola", sarcastically imputing the glory of the Indian chief to the city that was to be his monument. "Napoleon's Reply" to this "vain conceit" predicted doom for such a humble town and boasted that Napoleonic power would crush the futile hopes of Osceola.

Because Morford had squatted on the contemplated claim of Harris, the Gilbert faction got control of the site of the county seat. As a consequence, said Cyrus Sanders, Clark and Gilbert in the spring of 1838 "procured the services of George Bumgardner, the county surveyor of Muscatine county, and at once proceeded to lay off the southeast quarter of section 22 (about one and a half miles south of Iowa City) into town lots. They christened their young town Napo-

leon," and began the construction of "a good-sized frame house, which was the first frame house erected in Johnson county, and the only house ever erected in Napoleon."

According to a report of the Old Settlers of Johnson County in 1909, Napoleon "embraced all of the land in the farm of James McCollister and extended south to the township line. Gilbert's trading house was in the southeast corner of the town and the town of Poweshiek and the fortified city of Wapashashiek were both within the borders of Napoleon. Its streets were wide and miles in length; it had its parks and boat landings. Washington street extended east from the Iowa river two miles. It was a town of vast proportions."

Soon after the town was laid out a second county meeting held at Gilbert's trading post on June 1, 1838, asked permission to establish county government. This time the Wisconsin Territorial Legislature heeded the petition, and the request for county officers was written into law. When Napoleon became the seat of justice the dreams of Judge Harris and the town of Osceola faded from the history of Johnson County. The remnant of his hopes was an attempt to establish Osceola at the mouth of Old Man's Creek.

Events moved rapidly. In July, 1838, Con-

gress established a mail route between Bloomington and Napoleon. The first legislature of the Territory of Iowa in an act approved on January 25, 1839, authorized a Territorial road "commencing at the ferry landing opposite Oquawka, Illinois, thence on the nearest and best route, via Florence and Wapello, in Louisa county, to Napoleon, in Johnson county." A post office was established at the seat of justice on March 2, 1839. John Gilbert was appointed the first postmaster, but, according to local tradition, his commission reached Napoleon when he was fatally ill. Two days later the first white settler in Johnson County died. William M. Harris was appointed to fill the vacancy. On October 10, 1839, Thomas B. Johnson was granted a mail contract "for once-a-week" service (each way) between Bloomington and Napoleon. This service was to extend from November 7, 1839, to June 30, 1842.

Perhaps the most dramatic episode in the whole history of Napoleon was the meeting of the commissioners to locate the Territorial seat of government somewhere in Johnson County. The capital location act passed by the First Legislative Assembly of Iowa Territory on January 21, 1839, had provided that three named commissioners were to meet "on the first day of May, in the year eighteen hundred and thirty-nine . . . at the town

of Napoleon, and proceed to locate the seat of government". According to the *Journal* of the capital commissioners, Chauncey Swan and John Ronalds "met at the town of Napoleon" in strict compliance with the stipulations of the law. Precisely where they met, however, is uncertain. Perhaps, since Chauncey Swan was a stickler for observing the letter of the law, he and the settlers waited for John Ronalds at the little claim cabin on the site of Napoleon. More likely they met at Gilbert's trading house, because that was really the Napoleonic center of the community.

The arrival of Judge Joseph Williams to conduct the first district court of the county on May 13, 1839, caused widespread excitement among the settlers. Gilbert's trading house was anything but an adequate hotel. The selection of the seat of government for the Territory of Iowa had attracted speculators and pioneers. Thus, strangers from all parts of the Territory were coming to inspect the capital site. Said T. S. Parvin, the district prosecutor, when he came to the meeting of the court: "It was early evening when we reached the suburbs of the Capital to be. It was all suburbs, as the city of Napoleon only existed on paper."

According to the recollections of T. S. Parvin, the first court in Johnson County was held in

Gilbert's trading house, with the settlers using Chase's double cabin as a tavern-hotel. Cyrus Sanders and the writer of an early Johnson County history have pointed out that the store-room of Gilbert's cabin was utilized as a courtroom, which according to Parvin was "without a window" and had "only one door to admit the light and to permit the people to pass in and out". At least, the attorneys and jurors gathered at the trading posts instead of Napoleon proper.

The government of Johnson County was declared by law to be organized on July 4, 1838, but there were no officers until Henry Felkner, Abner Wolcott, and William Sturgis were elected county commissioners on September 10th. It appears that they met for the first time "at Napoleon" on March 29, 1839. Luke Douglass was appointed clerk and Wheaten Chase treasurer of the county. The eagle side of a ten-cent piece was adopted as the county seal. This meeting was probably at one of the trading houses down the river, rather than at the unfinished frame house on the site of Napoleon as some recollections seem to indicate. At the fall meeting of the county commissioners (Henry Felkner, Robert Wolcott, and Philip Clark) on October 7, 1839, perhaps in the still unfinished frame house at Napoleon, which was on Clark's farm, some routine

business was transacted and then the commissioners adjourned "to meet to-morrow morning at eight o'clock at the house of F. M. Irish in Iowa City."

In December of the same year the Legislative Assembly officially relocated the county seat at the capital city. The northwest quarter of section 15 in township 79, just south of the Territorial capital section 10, was selected for the seat of the county government on January 27, 1840. Meanwhile, Samuel H. McCrory, the postmaster of Napoleon, had moved the post office from Napoleon to Iowa City and on November 14, 1839, the name was officially changed.

The demise of the paper town was complete. Whereas on the Fourth of July in 1838 the pioneers had gathered at Napoleon, a year later they listened to the reading of the Declaration of Independence at Iowa City. The meeting of Capital Commissioners Chauncey Swan and John Ronalds at Napoleon on May 1, 1839, had sealed the fate of the vast paper town. The thudding hoofs of Philip Clark's horse, as the early settler made his midnight ride, had crushed the future prospects of the grandiose capital of imperial name. Said Cyrus Sanders: "Napoleon died a solitary and ignominious death, as did its great namesake on his lonely rock."

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