

HISTORICAL POLK COUNTY

EARLY HISTORY AND ORGANIZATION
OF POLK COUNTY

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"No duty is more imperative upon any generation
than that of looking backward as well as forward."

Hon. George F. Parker
(Biographer of Grover Cleveland)

One dark night in October, in eighteen forty-five,
The pioneers were waiting for the gun
Which should start them helter skelter on their
now historic drive,
For the Redman's race in Iowa was run!
And when, from the blockhouse roof came the long-
ed for musket-shot
Which echoed up and down the river's shore,
There was hurrying of men, each to claim his wish-
ed for lot
Which his greedy eyes selected long before!

Then, by starlight, torchlight, lantern, or perhaps
the waning moon
Slowly setting far adown the distant west,
With surveyor's chains and ropes were measured off
above the "Coon",
The lands and lots which seemed to them the best!
The southern hills looked down, all approvingly the
while,
The mingling rivers murmured their good cheer,
The October smoked-veiled sun said with nod and wink
and smile,
"Thus begins the building of a city here."

From We Are Building A City Here
by Tacitus Hussey

EARLY HISTORY AND ORGANIZATION OF POLK COUNTY

The record of the first occupation of Polk County by white people other than itinerant traders begins with a report made by John Dougherty, an Indian agent at Fort Leavenworth (1834-36), recommending more protection for the Sac and Fox Indians from exploitation by traders and liquor venders. This report, made to Maj. J. B. Brant, Quartermaster of the U. S. Army, December 16, 1834, suggested that a number of military posts be located along the Des Moines River, one at the Raccoon Forks.

Thus, strange as it sounds, the organization of Polk County may be traced to the necessity of protecting the Sac and Fox Indians from the white men as well as from their warlike Indian neighbors, the Sioux.

On March 9, 1835, the Adjutant General ordered Lt. Col. Stephen W. Kearney of the United States Dragoons at Fort Des Moines No. 1, located near the mouth of the Des Moines River, to proceed to the Raccoon Forks to select a site for a post. He arrived August 8, 1835, and subsequently reported that the Indians objected to the establishment of the post there, fearing civilization would drive away the game from their hunting grounds. Although Kearney did not think any place in the vicinity possessed advantages for a military post, he conceded the land in the forks of the Raccoon and Des Moines Rivers would be as suitable as any place nearby.

This somewhat adverse report retarded progress in the establishment of the fort until 1841. By then the encroachment of settlers had become so annoying that negotiations were started for purchase of the land from the Indians. On October 11, 1842 the Sac and Fox signed away their territory to the Government, with the stipulation that they might remain undisturbed for three years.

Immediately Capt. James Allen of the Dragoons at Fort Sanford, near Ottumwa, was ordered to make a recommendation for a post site. In November he selected the point at the Forks and reported in December, giving among his reasons: "The soil is rich, and wood, stone, water, and grass are at hand. It is high enough up the river to protect these Indians against the Sioux..... It will be about the head of keelboat navigation....."

When the War Department received this report, General Scott, on February 20, 1843, ordered Lieutenant Colonel Kearney to proceed to establish a temporary post with Captain Allen's Dragoons and a company of infantry from Fort Crawford. On May 9, 1843, Captain Allen according to the opinions of most Polk County historians, arrived on the steamer Ione, with supplies bought in Saint Louis, and landed at a point which is now the foot of Court Avenue, Des Moines. This was the first steamer to ascend the Des Moines River as far as the present seat of Polk County. Captain Allen left some troops to guard the supplies and returned on the steamer to Fort Sanford. Unable to get the steamer to make another trip at reasonable rates, he brought the Dragoons overland, arriving May 20, with four officers and 48 men. He was joined the next day by two officers and 44 of the Infantry from Fort Crawford.

Dr. Griffin was post surgeon, Major John Beach was Indian agent, assisted by Joseph Smart, interpreter. J. M. Thrift was made post tailor. There were five carpenters.

Five white women were at the fort in 1843, --- the wives of Dr. Griffin, Lieutenant Grier, Peter Newcomer, Josiah M. Thrift and Daniel Trullinger. These women proved very helpful in caring for the sick, during an epidemic of ague that summer.

At first, stables were built for the horses and then work was begun on the barracks, 25 one-story log cabins, whitewashed inside and out, with puncheon floors, brick chimneys, and fireplaces.

Daniel Trullinger, who arrived June 15, 1843 when the garrison yet lived in tents, was an expert brickmaker. He prospected for suitable clay and found it one-half mile up the Raccoon. Here he operated a brickyard, making two to four thousand bricks a day. Stone, which he burned for lime, was found along Four Mile Creek.

Captain Allen chose the name "Fort Raccoon" for the new fort and forwarded this recommendation to the Secretary of War. Adjutant General Jones wrote on the letter, "Fort Iowa would be a good name..... Fort Raccoon would not be in good taste." General Scott, a few days later, informed Captain Allen that the name was not considered proper for a military post; Fort Des Moines would be used until otherwise directed. But Captain Allen wrote again urging his choice, suggesting that the existence of the old Fort Des Moines No. 1 might cause confusion in delivery of his mail. This letter also contained a request that the fort be made a double rations post, a controversial subject which caused the report to be pigeonholed for nearly two years. In the interval the name "Fort Des Moines" had become generally accepted and the future seat of Polk County escaped being named after a little native animal, the raccoon.

The Ewing brothers, George and Washington, who arrived a few days previous to Captain Allen, established a trading post on the east side of the river, and Phelps and Company, trader, came a little later.

Captain Allen gave special permits to occupy the land and to raise hay, grain, beef, or other farm products necessary to the support of the garrison. Wilson Alexander Scott, whose body lies in the present capitol grounds, came with the Dragoons and was given the use of a section of land. Others who obtained permits in this manner, were Benjamin Bryant, James Drake, John Sturdevant, Robert Kinzie, Alexander Turner, and James Lamb, who sowed the first wheat and oats in the county.

Because of the uncertainty of navigation of the Des Moines River, Captain Allen, the first year, laid out a military road to Toole's Point (now Monroe, in Jasper County), where a connection was made with a road leading through Oskaloosa to Keokuk, Iowa.

Peter Newcomer received permission to make a claim for building a bridge over Four Mile Creek; Thomas Mitchell, who came in 1844, obtained a permit for building a bridge over Camp Creek.

Captain Allen and Moses Barlow put up a sawmill about nine miles south of the fort. This pioneer mill, operated by John Parmalee, became a great boon

to the early settlers who later used it to grind grist.

The purpose of the fort was accomplished effectually; there were no attacks by the Sioux. The Sac and Fox Indians were friendly and caused no trouble for the garrison. Although the region served mainly as their hunting ground, temporary lodges were maintained in the district by the chiefs. In the spring, fur traders came from the East to trade with the Indians and by permit from Captain Allen were allowed to exchange tobacco, ammunition, and trinkets, for furs.

The Indians enjoyed racing their ponies against the horses at the post. The races were held back of the fort and attracted all of the garrison who were off duty, as well as helpers. The scenes here became quite lively as the "Hi! Yi!" of the Indians mingled with shouts of the white people. Captain Allen's main annoyance was the constantly threatened intrusion of white settlers who intended to move in and take their choice of the land in advance of the day on which the territory would be open.

As the final day of the Indians' occupation approached, October 11, 1845, Captain Allen was besieged for permits to locate claims. Settlers camped on the boundaries and some had marked their choice of claims, which could not exceed 320 acres, to be held until the Government land sale at \$1.25 per acre.

On the evening of October 11, 1845 many settlers were stationed ready to begin measurements. At midnight, as the moon went down, the cannon at the fort boomed out the end of the Indian's day in Polk County. By the light of torches, lanterns, burning wood piles and wigwams, thousands of acres were staked out before daylight. In the meantime the Indians, struck with remorse for selling the land, performed religious rites to atone for the crime they felt they had committed.

The claim boundaries were quite faulty, some overlapping. As no titles could be obtained before the Government survey in 1847, it was apparent that some protection must be had, since military rule had expired and there was no local government. William H. Meacham called a meeting, October 14, at the cabin of John Scott. Twenty were present and with Meacham

as chairman and Joe Thrift as Secretary, a committee was appointed to form bylaws for a Claim Club. The committee reported a code the next day, with 70 names subscribed. This association, planned as local protection against claim jumpers, was the first non-military organization in Polk County and is known to have been successful in its work.

As several hundred Indians did not remove at once to the reservation in Kansas, the garrison was kept in the barracks during the winter, but in February 1846, an order was issued for evacuation of the post. Lieutenant Grier was directed to remove the remaining Indians. One group of 200, still unwilling to leave their native land, had slipped away and camped near where Madrid now stands. When overtaken they cried out "No go! No go!" but were forcibly escorted through Polk County, over Van's Hill below Coon River. Prof. Chas. A. Cumming caught the significance of this scene and recreated it in a painting which now hangs in the Polk County Courthouse.

On March 10, 1846, the last of the Dragoons quit the garrison, leaving a new community life well under way. On January 17, 1846, Governor Clarke signed the bill passed by the last Territorial Legislature of Iowa, creating Polk County, named for President James K. Polk. The new county received from the U. S. Government 160 acres of the military reservation with its buildings, to be used as a seat of justice, provided the county pay \$1.25 per acre to the regular land office.

Under the Territorial Government, the first counties organized were along the Mississippi, and as new counties were formed they were attached to the old counties. However it was not so with Polk, which at once began an independent existence. The counties subsequently framed on the north and west were first attached to it. The clerk of the district court was ordered to divide the county into voting precincts for an election to be held April 6, 1846, to elect officers to serve until a regular election in the fall. The first political meeting on record in the county was a caucus held February 14, of that year at the home of Doctor Brooks, to select candidates who would be favorable to Brooklyn, a proposed county seat.

Considerable interest was taken in the election. The polling places designated were at Fort Des Moines, Thomas Mitchell's on Camp Creek (now Madison Township) and the Parmalee Mill. Thomas Mitchell served

a free dinner at his precinct, where, it was said, the votes were cast into his hat. The county officers elected were Thomas Mitchell, sheriff; James Phillips, coroner; Thomas McMullen, recorder; W. F. Ayers, treasurer; G. B. Clark, assessor; Addison Michael, collector; Perry Grossman, county clerk; A. D. Jones, surveyor; John Saylor, judge of probate court; W. R. Meacham, Benjamin Saylor, and Eric Fouts, county commissioners. The first county court was held by Judge Joe Williams at Fort Des Moines, the next day after election, April 7, 1846, in a building where a school, taught by Mary Davis, was dismissed for the occasion. Thomas Baker, U. S. District Attorney, and John B. Lash, U. S. Marshal, were present.

The first procedure was a venire directing the sheriff to "summon twenty-three good and lawful men to appear forthwith before said court to act as grand jurors in and for said county." Thomas Mitchell, on the third day, brought in 25 men among whom were William Lamb, J. B. Scott, Samuel DeFord, Samuel Shafer, Wallace Clapp, Benjamin Saylor, Peter Newcomer, Newton Lamb, Thomas McMullen, Jerry Church, James Davis, J. J. Mildrum, Thomas Leonard, Benjamin Bryant, and A. Bronson. After being sworn, they retired to a spot near the creek, sat on a log and discussed county affairs. In about an hour they returned and as there were no true bills, they were discharged.

The county commissioners held their first meeting April 13, 1846. The only business transacted was the adoption of the eagle side of a half dollar as a seal for Polk County.

When the Act organizing Polk County passed, a contest for the county seat followed. Dr. Brooks, who had bought the Phelps trading site, laid out on paper the town of Brooklyn east of the river and bid for the county seat. Other contestants were Saylorville, Polk City, Dudley, laid out west of the river, and of course Fort Des Moines.

A lobby sent to the legislature by the Brooklyn bloc made little progress, perhaps owing to the fact that Judge Phineas M. Casady, the senator from the district, was a resident of Fort Des Moines. The objection to the Fort was that it was too far from the center of the county.

"Uncle Tommy" Mitchell, as he was called, planned to end the "central location" argument. One cold February morning, with Dr. P. B. Fagan, he started to Iowa City, making a stop east of Newton, nearly paralyzed from cold. William F. Ayers also took some friends, and in zero weather, drove to Iowa City, in a lumber wagon to lobby for the Fort.

At the capitol they conferred with Senator Casady and succeeded in securing an amendment to the Act of January 17, by which a tier of townships was cut from the east part of Polk County and added to Jasper, and a tier from Warren County was added to the south side of Polk, thus throwing Fort Des Moines into a nearly central location.

With its 25 or 30 families housed in the old barracks, the community now confidently awaited the locating commissioners appointed by the Governor. These men, T. Hughes of Johnson County, M. T. Williams of Mahaska County, and Giles Pinneo of Scott County, after a few days investigation, located the county seat at Fort Des Moines, May 25, 1846. The town at once began celebrating. Guns were fired, bonfires made and general festivities begun, terminating in a dance that night at Tom Baker's, to an orchestra of two fiddles.

On July 18, 1846, less than a year after legal settlement was allowed in Polk County, the census gave the population of the county as 1,301, and that of Fort Des Moines 127, of whom five were lawyers.