

Northern Kentucky Views Presents:

Part 5

History of Owen County: History

by

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HISTORY
Owen County

The writer acknowledges his indebtedness to Miss Maude Hill, (deceased) former teacher in the Owenton Graded School for much of the information contained in this article.

Miss Hill read a paper entitled, "Early History of Owen County" before the Owenton Woman's Club several years ago from which this information is obtained.

Owen County, the sixty-seventh in order of formation, was erected in 1819 out of parts of Callatin, Scott and Pendleton counties. This was twenty-seven years after Kentucky was admitted to the Union as a state. Owen County's entire population in 1820 consisted of 2,031 persons. In 1830, 5,786, in 1840, 8,232, in 1850, 10,444, in 1860, 12,719 and in 1870, 14,309 (more than at present). In 1840 Owen County had 1,281 slaves. In 1843 there were 1,143 slaves valued at \$319,731. In 1860, four years before the close of the Civil War, there were seventy free negroes in the county, and in 1870 there were 1,176 negroes in the county all free, of course. The average value of land per acre in the county in 1843 was \$4.91.

When Owen county was first formed the county seat was located in Heslerville, better known as Hesler. This village was, and is, located about seven miles south of Owenton and at that time it was much larger than it is today. The first court that was ever held in Owen County was held in the private residence of one Jacob Hesler (Hence the name of the town, Heslerville) on May 10, 1819. Here

the county seat remained until 1822 when it was decided to remove it to Owenton where it would be more centrally located. After coming to Owenton there was no place to hold court, and at the first session of court, held on the 11th day of March, 1822, Thomas D. Bryan offered his home for the purpose of holding said court and the offer was gratefully accepted by the court; but during this first sitting of the court a committee was appointed to plan the erection of a court house to be patterned as nearly as possible after the court house of New Castle in the adjoining county of Henry. The court appointed John C. Bacon, John Gayle, Cyrus Wingate and James Giss as the committee to attend to this business. The building was to be of brick and was to be completed in two years at a cost agreed upon by the committee and the contractors; contracts were to be let to the lowest bidder on the first Monday in May, 1822.

Thomas Goddard was the first constable in Owen County, John Schrimshaw the first magistrate, Cyrus Wingate the first sheriff, he being appointed by acting Governor, Gabriel Slaughter. John C. Bacon was the first clerk of the county, he serving for both county and circuit courts. John Trimble was the first county court Judge. In 1824 Cyrus Wingate was sent to the House of Representatives from Owen County and in 1828 was further honored by being sent to the Senate. James P. Orr was the representative in 1845 and in 1851 he was elected to the Senate. Jeremiah Lillard was the representative in 1865, C. W. Threlkeld in 1871, with J. H. Dorman coming between in 1869. Asa P. Grover was State Senator in 1857. He afterwards served in the lower house of the National Congress.

For a long time all the business in Owenton was transacted on Adams Street, and among the first merchants were Roberts and Leibeman. The first hotel was built upon the present site of the St. Nicholas Hotel. The old house that stood on the corner of Adams and Adair streets belonging to Miss Lizzie McKay was there when Owan became the county seat. (This house stood for many years and is remembered as a land mark by some of the older citizens. It has been torn away and the site is now occupied by a modern home). While the county seat was located at Hesler, the jail was a log pen and when they built their first jail in Owenton it was a double log pen of immense logs built up, with hugh logs tooed up on end between the pens, thus safely securing the prisoners. This building was located where the undertaking establishment of Redding and Bradley is located (the Sonestreet building now occupied by Deming's store). The second jail was of brick, built upon the lot owned by Mr. George Hicks and the building is at present being used as a dwelling by Mr. Hicks. The third of brick and stone is the one now in use.

The first killing in Owenton was in the street in front of the lot on which the Peoples Bank and Trust Company now stands. The name of the man killed was Cushionberry. The second killing was in the rear of what is known as the Glasscock building (now known as the Marshall building). The killing occurred in the rear of the A & P grocery on what was then a vacant lot but is now the Charley Marshall garage. The man killed was named Williams.

Owen county was settled by families coming mostly from Virginia. They included the Fosters, Harrisons, Vallandinghams, Forsees, Hern-dons, Yanceys, Threlkelds, Garnetts, Cobbs, Welches, Wilhoites and many others too numerous to mention, whose descendents still re-side in the county. The people were very primitive, but descend-ing from the very best blood of Virginia, they were dignified and very proud of their ancestry.

At the time of settlement most of the county was covered by a dense forest with no roads and the usual manner of traveling, by the majority at least, was either walking or on horseback. The women generally rode behind their men but sometimes on mounts of their own. In this manner they travelled to church, quiltings, apple-pealings, corn-huskings, wood-choppings, log-rollings, etc. Mrs. Ann Garnett says it was nothing to see a large man with a two bushel "turn" of corn in his arms seated upon a horse while his wife rode behind him with a child in her arms. The first carriage brought to Owen county was by George Forsee in 1826 and up until as late as 1843 there were only fourteen carriages and two buggies in the county. The majority of the people who walked went bare-foot during the summer months, carrying their shoes and stockings in their hands until almost to the end of the journey, when they would sit down and put them on.

The women did all of their own work, with the assistance of slaves until they were freed, such as carding, spinning and weav-ing cloth from which they made their clothing. The men wore mostly

jeans in winter and linen in summer. The men's coats for every day wear were similar to the present day hunting coats. There were pockets for gloves, food, ammunition and a belt for the hunting knife. The women wore lindsey woolsey home-spun dresses for every day with finer silks for Sunday and were quite as tastefully and fascinatingly arrayed as any of the ladies of our present day. Their bonnets were of leghorn, very large, often being as much as eighteen inches across the bonnet and some of them costing as much as \$25.00 or \$30.00 each. They were worn indefinitely, not changed once or twice a season. At one time in Owen all bonnets were made after one pattern or shape. But very little jewelry was worn but what were generally expensive heirlooms of Virginia ancestors.

In 1843 there were only three pair of gold "spectakles", fourteen gold and fifteen silver watches and three pianos in the entire county. The furniture of the mass of the people was mostly home made and C. W. Threlkeld, (deceased) says he has heard many people say that they had slept on beds made by driging a forked stick into the earthen floor of the home, resting one end of a pole on the fork and the other between the logs forming the side wall of the room and arranging the bedding on poles so arranged.

Mr. Threlkeld goes on to state that his mother-in-law, Elizabeth Wingate Smither, was considered the most beautiful woman in the county in 1844 and described her thus: "She was as pretty as a speckled pup."

In Owen County and in the entire State until 1871 no one could procure a divorce except by special act of the General Assembly. This act, which became a law in 1852, not only kept divorces low in number but caused those considering marriage to be sure of their affection for each other for if they were married they were really married.

In 1819 the woods of Owen abounded in bears, panthers, wolves, deer and wild turkeys. Food, especially meat, was plentiful. Common danger made neighbors friends and community life was the closest that can be imagined. There has never been but one Indian raid through what is now Owen County. The Indians did not molest the settlers then (1819) and they were free to travel miles without fear to assist their neighbors at corn-huskings, wood-choppings, etc. At all of these gatherings nearly all of the men used whiskey but very few got drunk or even tipsy. Whiskey of the very best quality cost only about 20¢ per gallon. Mrs. Cyrus Threlkeld says her grandfather kept his barrel of whiskey in a bed room and when any one of the family wanted a toddy, one of the old servants would take a bottle with a string tied around the neck and let it down into the barrel through a hole in the top. She says that she has only to close her eyes and hear that bottle gurgle, gurgle, gurgle as it filled.

There were no metal roads as that time and what roads there were were almost impassible in the later winter and early spring. Therefore the farmers were careful to lay in sufficient provisions

in the fall to last all winter. For a time they procured their salt at or near Sanders. They would take kettles and camping outfits and remain until the entire party or parties going together had made sufficient salt to last a year. Homes were lighted by means of home-made tallow candles or grease lamps.

In politics Owen county was always noted for its remarkable devotion to the Democratic party. For President of the United States in the election of 1868, the vote cast for the democratic candidate was 2,198 and only 82 for the republican candidate. in 1870 the vote for the democratic nominee for governor of the state was 2,389 and 288 for the republican nominee. The increase in later years in the republican vote cast was due to the freeing of the negroes and their participation in politics.

At three different times the county was changed from one congressional district to another, and on each occasion the political complexion of the district was changed. The first change caused the election of Major John C. Ereckinridge to Congress as the democratic representative from the Ashland district. That was in 1851 and again in 1853 he won over former Governor Robert P. Letcher because of his popularity with the electorate of Owen county. Since that time Ereckinridge has been the idol of the people and he has shown his appreciation of such remarkable devotion by naming one of his sons, Owen County Breckinridge.

Two confederate camps were established in the county during the War of the Rebellion - Camp Marshall, named after one established by General Humphry Marshall in the summer of 1861 near Cobb's Mill now known as Lusby's Mill. Across Eagle Creek, opposite the village where the camp was located, the hillside was very steep and to this day (twenty years ago) the "rebel" boys laugh and joke when they recall their tumbles down the hill when they went to the village (Cobb's Mill) after whiskey. The second camp was at a large barn that is still standing. It is located on the Vallandingham farm about one and one-half miles southeast of Owenton. The sentiments and sympathies of the people of Owen county were almost unanimous in favor of the south. Few, if any, counties in the state furnished so many soldiers to the confederate army in proportion to the population.

Bibliography

Miss Maude Hill (deceased). Material gathered from a paper now in possession of Mrs. E. W. Simpson, written by Miss Hill several years (about 20) ago. Miss Hill gathered her material from citizens of the county then living, most of whom the author remembers, and nearly all of whom were relatives of his. People then living could recall the early history of the county quite well. The article submitted contains those things handed down from parent to child, but some have been supported by documentary evidence.