

FOUNDING OF NEW ALBANY

America was beginning to move west in the early 1800s. From New England and the other eastern states a steady stream of emigrants set out over the mountains and down rivers. Among them were three brothers named Scribner. They were restless Yankees from Connecticut, moving from place to place in New England and New York. It was the Scribners who founded New Albany in 1813 and named it after Albany, N.Y.

A shrill whistle and the roar of escaping steam echoed over the Falls of the Ohio River in 1811. Settlers hurried to the river bank in time to see the first steamboat on the Ohio churning its way from Pittsburgh to New Orleans. About the same time the tiny boat passed the Falls, Joel Scribner, a New York City groceryman, decided to seek his fortune on the western frontier. In 1811 that meant Ohio and Indiana.

Joel and his brother-in-law, William Waring, planned to set up a tanning and leather business in Cincinnati, a new village of log cabins and mud streets. But shortly after they arrived in the little settlement, Waring went off to fight in the War of 1812. Left without his partner, Joel Scribner gave up the idea of a leather business.

But as he watched the constant stream of settlers going west, he decided that founding a new town would be the best way to make a fortune. He called his younger brothers, Abner and Nathaniel, from New York, to Cincinnati and the trio set off down the river in a flatboat to find the best site for a future city.

When they reached the Falls they were impressed. Abner Scribner was a millwright, and he had visions of a line of mills powered by the water-power of the Falls. But they discovered that the land around the Falls had already been marked off into towns – Louisville, Jeffersonville, and Clarksville. But they liked the area and bought land as close to the Falls as they could – 826 acres for \$8,000. They bought land on the Indiana side because Kentucky was a slave state and they were opposed to slavery.

The Scribners were not woodsmen. They were businessmen, and they came west to go into business. But first they had to clear land for a cabin. They cut the first tree on March 2, 1813, and soon the woods were ringing with the sound of their axes. By May they had completed a large log cabin. Soon they hired a surveyor named John Graham to lay out the streets, and set a crew of woodsmen to work cutting trees and building cabins to sell to the newcomers. Two years after the first steamboat on the Ohio had steamed past, New Albany was on the map and advertisements in eastern newspapers invited settlers to come to the new town.

Probably none of the Scribners realized how significant that steamboat would be to New Albany. But they knew the river was a good place for a town. The Ohio had been a high road for trade and travel by the Indians long before Europeans even knew the American continent existed.

And when white settlers began spilling over the mountains from the East in the early 1800s they, too, used the river as the easiest way to travel. New Albany was on the line of communication.

The town was only a year old when Joel Scribner moved his family out of the log cabin and into a new frame house at State and Main. That house now owned by the Piankeshaw Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution is the oldest house still standing in New Albany.

The little village grew slowly at first, then picked up speed. By 1820 the population had reached 1,000. There was a school, stores, churches, taverns, even weekly newspaper. Names of some of the first settlers are still well-known in New Albany – Conner, Seabrook, Hedden, Tuley.

More and more steamboats appearing on the river. The Scribners had cast a keen eye on the supply of good boat-building timber in the woods surrounding the city. They knew it would be good for building flatboats, and it turned out to be the best kind of timber for the new steamboats – oak, hickory, and chestnut. By 1820 four steamboats had been built at New Albany. Soon the boat building business was well established and some were even built along Silver Creek. New Albany and the steamboat were born at the same time and grew up together. Now New Albany's early history is largely of its connection with steamboats and the river.

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