

THE ENGLISH SETTLEMENT ON RIVER ROAD

A bit of Old England in Floyd County – that was the area along River Road below New Albany in the middle years of the Nineteenth Century. English emigrants from Lincolnshire transformed the fertile river bottom lands into the garden spot of the Falls Cities area. The story of the English settlers follows.

The New Albany wharf was a busy, bustling place in 1841 when William Wattam and his bride, the former Mary Wright, stepped ashore from a river steamer to begin a new life in a new land. They had come from Lincolnshire in England . . . across the Atlantic to New Orleans and up the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers. No doubt they had been attracted to New Albany because of its reputation as the largest, most prosperous city in Indiana. But the Wattams were farmers, not city folk, and it was to the fertile river bottom lands below New Albany that they went to settle.

Their letters home must have been glowing, for a few years later Wattam's brother arrived – just in time to serve in the U.S. Cavalry in the Mexican War. Then in 1850 came three other brothers and three sisters, followed a year later by another sister, her husband and son and a dozen or more other Lincolnshire friends and neighbors.

Thus 10 years after William Wattam arrived, a whole settlement of English farmers resided along River Road. Others came from Lincolnshire from time to time to swell the ranks of the settlers, some as late as 1873, and one lone arrival in 1887.

Though the river bottoms were some of the most fertile land in Floyd County and the area where the first pioneers settled, most of it was still densely wooded when the English arrived.

Brining with them the thrift and industrious habits of the sturdy English yeoman, the newcomers soon transformed the River Road area of Floyd County into the most prosperous farm area of the county with land there commanding the then fabulous prices of \$300 to \$400 an acre. The principal products were potatoes, cabbages and onions which found a ready market in the South. In fact, so important did this trade become that steamboats landed at points along the river bank to carry the produce south at a handsome profit to the farmers.

This prosperity was reflected in fine, well-kept homes and neat lawns and flower gardens. The River Road became a favorite Sunday drive in the county for city residents, and the English farmers themselves owned some of the finest horses and carriages to be seen on the streets of New Albany.

The settlers were all staunch Methodists . . . it was in Lincolnshire that John Wesley, founder of Methodism, was born. In 1849 William Wattam led his neighbors in founding McKindry Chapel. It was erected on River Road north of Two-Mile Lane on the site of an old log church which had been built in the pioneer days and used jointly by several denominations. Their prosperity enabled the congregation to pay the minister a good salary, and the pulpit at McKindry chapel became attractive to some of the most able preachers of the day.

Later, in 1874, Embury Chapel was founded farther down the river. One of the English families attending this church was the Pouchers, and Richard Poucher became one of the most brilliant Methodist preachers. He served as

district superintendent here at the beginning of the century. Though born and bred in Floyd County, he spoke with a marked English accent.

The English settlement retained its cohesiveness for several decades, but the decline of river traffic after the Civil War cut into the lucrative Southern market. The greatest blow, however, came with three devastating floods in a row . . . in 1882, 1883, and 1884. Much of the top soil was washed away and many buildings destroyed.

Today McKindry Chapel has vanished, damaged so badly by flood in 1907 that it never was used again. And though River Road is no longer the area of the "English farmers", Embury Chapel remains as a living testimony to their deep religious conviction and many of their descendants still live in the county where their forebearers came to find a better life.

[Vol. III, Historical Series No. 12]