

WHO WAS THE FIRST SETTLER IN FLOYD COUNTY?

The opening program last fall in this current series on the history of Floyd County and surrounding areas, told of the earliest known settlers here – the ancient Mound Builders who were conquered and absorbed by the Indian tribes familiar to us from history books. Our program today also will discuss early settlers as we explore the question of who was the first white settler in Floyd County.

August 27, 1804 is an important date in the early history of Southern Indiana. On that date William Henry Harrison, governor of the Indiana Territory, negotiated with the Indian tribes a treaty opening to white settlement the whole area lying between Clarksville and Vincennes. Before that date only two areas in Indiana were open to white settlers – the Clark Grant at the Falls of the Ohio and a large tract around Vincennes.

The route of U.S. Highway 150 today follows approximately the northern boundary of the territory ceded by the Indians. And that is not mere coincidence. One of Governor Harrison's primary motives in negotiating the treaty was to gain control from the Indians of the overland route between the settlements at the Falls of the Ohio and Vincennes, capital of the Indiana territory. That route was the famed Buffalo Trace, and the treaty line was drawn just far enough north so that the Buffalo Trace was no longer in Indian territory. Today Highway 150 follows much the same route as the old Buffalo Trace.

The news that this large area of Southern Indiana was legally open to settlement spread like wildfire through Kentucky. The signing of the Indian treaty meant settlers could move in and purchase land from the Government – and

that meant clear title to the land rather than the bitter experience of disputed land claims which had caused trouble for many Kentucky pioneers.

That settlers moved across the Ohio River in great numbers is indicated by the fact that some three years after the treaty was signed, Josiah Trueblood built a grist mill on Falling Run Creek. This mill was in the present limits of New Albany near where Pearl Street crosses the creek. There were enough settlers at that early date to keep the mill busy grinding corn and wheat.

Though many details of the early history of Floyd County went unrecorded and have passed from memory, there is no doubt about who was the first settler to move into what is now Floyd County after the Indian treaty was signed.

On November 4, 1804, Robert LaFollette, a Kentuckian, was married in that state, probably in Louisville. The next day, accompanied by his young bride, he crossed the Ohio River into Indiana and made camp along the river near the point where the present Harrison County line crosses Road 111. LaFollette had already selected this site as his future home before his marriage. His nearest neighbors were at Clarksville up the river while another settler or two were down river about ten miles. Thus three months after the treaty was signed, the first settler arrived in Floyd County.

LaFollette immediately set to work to make a clearing and erect a one-room cabin. He furnished it with rude furniture he made himself from the logs he had cut. This pioneer home in the wilderness was completed in December 1804. In the period before Trueblood's mill was erected on Falling Run Creek, LaFollette took his grain to the Tarascon Mill at Shippingsport to be ground. Reminiscing in later life he recalled that in those early days he could very easily kill all the game he needed any morning within a half hour period and never go more than 50 yards from his cabin. He declared that he often shot wild turkeys

from his door-yard, and recalled that friendly Indian hunting parties often camped near his home.

This old pioneer lived to see Floyd County dotted with towns and farms where in 1804 had been an unbroken wilderness. He died in 1867 at the age of 89 – the patriarch of all Floyd County settlers.

But there is another prospect for the honor of being the first white settler in Floyd County – John Carson. His claim was made by his grandson, John Aston, a New Albany resident who died in 1890.

Relating what was told to him by his mother, John Aston said that John Carson and his family came to Clarksville from Kentucky either in the fall of 1799 or the winter of 1800, and settled at the mouth of Silver Creek on the present Floyd County side. This is plausible since the original boundary of the town of Clarksville extended across Silver Creek into what is now Floyd County. Thus the Carsons, though settling in what later became Floyd County, were living in Clarksville. Family tradition says that Carson kept a boat not only for this own use, but as a ferry across the mouth of the creek. Here in this cabin he is said to have died in 1804, the very year Robert LaFollette arrived.

There is no reason to doubt this story. John Aston was a well-known and respected New Albany resident and he learned the facts from his mother, Mary Carson, who came with her father and family to Indiana and lived in the cabin at the mouth of Silver Creek. But there is no record that John Carson ever purchased the land he occupied . . . so Robert LaFollette still holds title as the first settler to occupy land for which he entered a claim to purchase it from the Government.

