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Railroad key to Marion's history

Suzanne Barnes

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Marion is named after Gen. Francis Marion, the famed Swamp Fox of the Revolutionary War. It was a particularly appropriate name for the town because of all the "sloughs or swampy areas north and west of the town," says Onalee Arnold of Marion.

According to the 1911 "History of Linn County Iowa, From Its Earliest Settlement to the Present Time," Marion "was laid out in 1839 on a semi-circular plateau of prairie that lay within a timbered crescent bordering and following the course of Indian Creek on the west, and opening into a vast extent of prairie on the East, to which it lay joined like a protected harbor of the sea. Before it was laid out in the spring of 1839, it was located by a special board of commissioners appointed by the territorial legislature of Iowa in 1838, as the county seat of Linn County ..."

The new town consisted of 56 blocks, with lots 60 by 120 feet and alleys 10 feet wide. The four streets enclosing the public square were laid out 80-feet wide, with all other streets 60 feet wide. A park, consisting of the block directly north of where the county buildings were to stand, was reserved for public use.

The first actual town settler was said to be William K. Farnsworth, who entered a claim in 1838 in an area known as Irish Hill. About the same time, James Preston and Prior Scott also entered a large tract of land east of Irish Hill, also known as Isbell's Grove.

According to Marion history buff Onalee, Prior Scott had been an Indian agent in the Iowa territory and became the executioner or the hangman for the territory. His nickname was "Col. Dread Scott."

The first house built in Marion, although then without the town plat, was erected in 1839. Owned by Luman M. Strong, the building also was the first tavern.

In those days, taverns offered spirits, meals and rooms for the night.

The first liquor license cost Strong \$6 per year. After a few years, Strong paid \$50 to the county treasury for his license to sell groceries and "spiritous liquor," \$25 a year less than the annual salary of R. P. Lowe, district attorney.

Although the 1911 Linn history says that Addison Daniels served as Marion's first postmaster, one of Luman Strong's descendents saw the original papers in Washington, D.C., that named Luman the first postmaster.

Addison Daniels had Hosea Gray - who later became the sheriff - build a 20- by 22-foot building, which was the second store in Marion. The first store was built by Henry Thompson and David A. Woodbridge on north 11th Street. Commissioners allowed the men to license and vend "for one year from the 9th day of October 1839."

During that time, commissioners were elected as fiscal agents of the county. They had about the same powers as the County Board of Supervisors.

By 1840, three homes were evident on Marion streets, including that belonging to George Greene, one of Marion's first lawyers. He later became an Iowa Supreme Court judge and prominent Cedar Rapids citizen.

William Abbe, for whom Abbe Creek is named, and Asher Edgerton built the first county jail - and the first county building - at a cost of \$635. "It was a two-story building with the first floor underground," says Onalee. "To get to it, you entered by a ladder to the upper story and let down the trapdoor to the lower part."

The jail was located at the present site of the Gospel Light Baptist Church, 995 Fifth Ave.

The first major crime - murder - was committed in 1847. Allegedly, James Reed struck Nathaniel Carnagy with a sled stake, fracturing his skull. After Carnagy died, Reed, a farmer, was indicted but found not guilty by a jury.

Eight marriages were recorded in 1841. The first divorce case, concerning Dyer Usher vs. Mary Ann Usher, was ordered dismissed in 1843. Linn County's first divorce was granted in 1844 at district court.

One of the first county judges in Marion was William Smyth, who came to Marion in 1846, the year he was admitted to the bar. His home was purchased by the Sisters of Mercy to serve as a facility for the elderly, an unsuccessful venture for the nuns. Two years later, it became a boarding school for children known as St. Berchman's, located at First Ave. and 15th St.

By August 1863, 497 dwellings had been completed in Marion compared with 329 in Cedar Rapids.

Many fine homes in Marion came to be built on Pucker Street by the "aristocrats" of town, says Helen Oxley, another Marion resident and history buff.

"I was a great big girl when I found out it was Eighth Avenue," says the 88 year old.

Helen knew the family who resided in a Marion home now opened to the public as a historical museum. It is the home owned by the family of Earl Granger, who occupied the Granger House, 970 10th St., from 1873 to 1973. "They were interested in horses so I used to ride with some of them," says Helen.

The Granger House now is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Railroads played an important role in Marion's history. According to the 1878 "History of Linn County," "there was every prospect that it would be favored with a railroad in 1854, but, to the disappointment of all, this railroad scheme failed. The hard times of 1857-8 set in, another railroad was completed to a neighboring town in the county (Cedar Rapids), and the progress of Marion was arrested. ...

"In the spring, another rail road project was started, under favorable auspices. An immediate connection with Dubuque, and thence with Eastern markets, was offered, and the energetic citizens worked successfully for the culmination of the scheme. Since that time, the Sabula, Ackley & Dakota Railroad has made Marion its western terminus and more recently, in the present year (1878), it has consolidated with the Dubuque Southwestern Railroad."

The Milwaukee Railroad established a roundhouse at Marion in 1887, 15 years after that railroad was said to have arrived in Marion. But in 1918, railroad officials relocated the roundhouse to Atkins.

The Milwaukee discontinued passenger service to Marion in 1971 and ended freight service in 1980.

On Nov. 6, 1919, Marion lost in its struggle with Cedar Rapids for the county seat. Court continued to be held in Marion until July 9, 1925, when the new building was dedicated in Cedar Rapids.