

PULASKI COUNTY HISTORY

AMERICA, ILLINOIS

In the early days of Illinois history, many grand schemes were dreamed up. One such Utopian scheme involved plans to cut a canal a few miles north of Cairo to unite the waters of the Mississippi with the Ohio, via the town of America, which was then in Johnson County. The company incorporated to undertake this massive project would receive tolls, wharfage charges, and so fourth. Nothing however, came of this. This ame scheme was revived some 15 or 18 years later in connection with the present Mound City. It is possible that the company involved in his scheme was the same as the one that founded Trinity and America, and whose members were involved in a variety of business ventures in the newly opened West.

The land company that platted America was made up of James Riddle, Harvey Bechtle, and Thomas Sloo of Cincinnati and Stephen and Henry Rechter of St. Louis, along with others they interested in their venture. In 1817, Dr. William M. Alexander bought one-half interest in two sections owned by James Riddle, section 9 and 10 two miles below Caledonia and six miles above the mouth of the Cache River. On this land, the first high ground above the mouth of the Ohio, America was platted.

Another name familiar to historians of Alexander and Pulaski Counties appears in the founding of America. This is John Dougherty of mound City. The elder Dougherty resided in Trinity and when this Cache River port began its decline, he moved to America.

In 1819, the year following the admission of Illinois to the Union, the Legislature set off Alexander County. __ named after Dr. William M. Alexander __ and made America, conditionally, the county seat. The founders of the town had great ambition for the site. Not long before, in 1812, Washington D.C. had been burned by the British. The legend of the town's formation says that America was planned to be the new capital of the United States. It was in the geographical center of the expanding nation and far from the British.

The plat of the town shows that the streets were named after the states then in existence. The only street still in use is Maryland Street, which is now a country lane.

America remained the county seat of Alexander County from 1819 until 1835. By 1821 a brick jail, courthouse, and 24 double cabins were built. The first County Commissioner's Court composed of Nesbet Allen, Samuel M. Phillip, and William Alexander met at the town on June 7, 1819. Sidney Grant was Clerk of the court and was probably the first practicing attorney in what is now Alexander and Pulaski Counties.

America with a population of several hundred was the chief town in the region. New settlements continued to spring up and older ones to increase in size. America, Greenville, Maryville, Frankfort, Equality, Jonesboro and others grew to some importance before 1830. Rivers formed the chief connecting links between settlements,

but roads, too were opened between the major settlements. Roads linked the Wabash and Ohio River towns of Vincennes, Shawneetown, Golconda and America with towns on the Mississippi__ Kaskaskia and St. Louis, and Cape Girardeau and Jackson, Missouri.

When America was founded river commerce was carried on by flatboat and keel boat. Soon however, steamboats came to dominate river travel. The large sandbar in front of the town, which had not hindered the flat boats, prevented the steamboats from landing at the town.

Then in the winter of 1820 a boat came into America bringing Yellow Fever. Many inhabitants died because of the lack of medical care.

The town gradually declined, and finally in 1835 the county seat was moved to Unity. The county seat remained there until the county was divided in 1843 and Pulaski County formed, when Caledonia was made the new County Seat.

America did not relinquish the county seat easily, however in 1825 the Trustees of the town made a deal with the county commissioners. The county owed the town \$1150 in County Orders which the Trustees agreed to surrender as long as the county seat remained in America. If the county commissioners moved the county seat elsewhere, the debt would be renewed and interest begin to accumulate.

In 1835 the county seat was moved to Unity. The Town of America sued the County commissioners, but no records remain to indicate whether the case was ever settled.

The loss of the county seat was the final blow to the river port of America. By an act of the Legislature, on February 13, 1861, the town of America was vacated.

The site continued to be a landing, used by steamboats such as the DICK FOWLER which made a round trip daily between Paducah and Cairo. At the America Landing, grain was loaded on the steamer and shipped to the milling companies in Cairo.

When the New York Central Railroad was built in the 1870`s, a depot and post office were established a mile and a half west of the original town site, and named for the riverport.

America at the turn of the century consisted of one commercial building, a church__ the First Christian Church, two schools, and within a radius of a mile, 35 or 40 homes. The commercial building was the train station, which served as depot, general merchandise store, post office and telephone. The Big Four Railroad ran four passenger trains daily through the village, stopping only to receive or discharge passengers. The northbound evening train usually stopped to discharge passengers who had spent the day in Mound City or Cairo. The depot also served as the primary social meeting place for farmers in the area and was the site of election night celebrations.

A sign on Highway 37 now points to the old river town. The road to America crosses the railroad tracks, becoming Maryland Street after a sharp left-hand turn. A church, the America Christian Church and several farms are located on the town site.

Nick Niestrath, who farms part of the area, reported digging up bricks and other artifacts while plowing. The original America cemetery is downriver from the Keistler farm. Many of the original headstones were removed for use as foundation stones, door stops, and so forth, but some grave are still visible.

From "**The History, Legend and Lore of Pulaski County, Illinois**" by **Owen Evers and Malcolm Beck**.

Bibliography:

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Nick Niestrath

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