

Rush County Bicentennial

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Rush County will celebrate its 200th birthday in 2022. But the history of settlement in this part of Indiana really got underway on October 1, 1820, when land went up for sale at the Federal Land Office at Brookville for \$1.25 an acre. It took a couple of years for Rush County to organize its government and court system. Surveying of the county was finished by April 29, 1820.

To begin with, the area where we now live was “purchased” from the Native American tribes at a treaty agreement at St. Mary’s, Ohio, from October 2 to October 6, 1818. This agreement went into effect in 1819. Indiana had already become a state in 1816, but the 60,000 population needed for statehood lived in the southern third of the state. The northern two thirds was Native American territory.

So, who was living in this area from 1818 to 1820? Well, first of all there were still some Native Americans here, the Delaware. They were given three years to vacate the land and move to an area west of the Mississippi River. The Delaware villages were usually on high ground near a stream. There had been an encampment on Mahoning Creek (Ben Davis Creek), where the Arnold farm is now (east of Rushville and north of State Road 44). One of their leaders named Ben Davis did not sign the St. Mary’s Agreement, and he was still here.

Also, there were several white settlers living here even though the land was not yet officially part of Indiana. These people were referred to as “squatters”. They came into this area early to check out the best location, build a temporary dwelling, then wait for the land sale at Brookville. A few never intended to buy land.

Some of the “squatters” living here prior to 1820 were:

George Shoppelle lived northwest of the present location of Moscow on the Flatrock River. Shoppelle was a French fur trader who may have been here as early as 1814. He married a Delaware/Shawnee, and he had a good relationship with the Delaware tribe. His home was made of limestone from the river, and it had walls 18-24 inches thick. The oak shutters had gun ports cut out in the shape of a cross. Shoppelle used mortar composed of lime, sand, and horsehair to “chink” the stone structure. (Information from Jack Spaulding).

Isaac Williams squatted on land a half mile north of the present town of New Salem. There was a trading post there, and the Williams family lived at peace with the Delaware in the area. Williams was able to get a last second loan from a man at Brookville so he could purchase his ground.

Two of the first white settlers in the “New Purchase” were Enoch Russell and Zach Collins. They built cabins about one and a half miles north of the town of New Salem. Obviously the area near New Salem was close to the land office at Brookville and was some of the first ground settled.



Sam Gruell squatted on land that is now part of the Arnold farm. He sold his ground to John Arnold for \$50.00.

Dr. John Arnold, who wrote the History of Rush County Indiana 1888, describes a squatter named Jacob Dewey. Dewey had no desire to own land, but he helped new settlers clear their ground with his axe and team of oxen. He eventually moved further west.

Henry Sidorus settled on the south side of the Flat Rock River. He assisted other settlers clearing the land with his team of horses. He later removed to Illinois.

Richard Thornberry settled on Flat Rock River some four miles below the present town of Rushville at the mouth of Hurricane Creek.

Other squatters of note were Weir Cassady, John Hale, and Ben Barton.

Sometimes there was a problem when another person arrived at Brookville to purchase the land before the squatter got there. The purchaser might allow the squatter to stay on part of the land, or he might pay the squatter for any improvements.

Who else was here? The land surveyor from Brookville, William B. Laughlin, and two of his older sons Harmony and Cicero were here. They had been entrusted to survey the land into geographic townships and sections.

By October 1, 1820, the "New Purchase" land went up for sale. You could buy a minimum of 80 acres for \$100.00 (\$1.25 per acre). William B. Laughlin himself bought 160 acres and then gave the new county 25 acres for the county seat. We will mention more about Laughlin and his achievements later on.

Next time I write we will take a closer look at land purchases, land clearing, and organization efforts in the area to be named Rush County.