

Rush County Bicentennial – The Journey Continues

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Rush County's Bicentennial will be celebrated in 2022. In my first article I presented what was going on when the land in Rush County was purchased from the Federal Government in 1820 for \$1.25 per acre.

The settlers that came to the Rush County area traveled from a variety of places. Some came down the Ohio River from Pennsylvania to Cincinnati, then north to the "New Purchase". Others came by wagon across Ohio. If they had the means, they had purchased a Conestoga wagon made near the Conestoga River in Pennsylvania. Still others came across the mountains from North Carolina to Kentucky, then on to Indiana.

It was not unusual for the men of the family to travel here earlier than the women and children. This gave the men a chance to construct a shelter in advance. There were two goals for the typical pioneer's first year. Construct a log cabin and clear one acre of trees for a corn crop.

The best location for the log cabin would be on high ground near a river, stream, or spring(s). But, drainage was really important. You didn't want your home next to a swamp or stagnant pool of water, and obviously you didn't want your corn crop standing in water.

Trees were the settler's friend, but they also stood in the way of land cultivation. Trees that were eighteen inches and under in diameter were cut down with an axe or two-man saw, stacked, and burned. Trees that were more than eighteen inches in diameter were girdled or frilled all the way around to cut off moisture and kill the tree.

Very few settlers cleared their land "smack smooth". Besides all the forest, the roots and rocks made plowing the ground difficult. A breaking plow was a big help, if there was one in the neighborhood. Most early fields were planted and cultivated with a hoe. Planting was done in "checked rows" that could be cultivated in both directions.

We in Rush County have our early settlers to credit for clearing the fertile farmland. The next time you drive through the vast acreage of corn and soybeans, remember that two hundred years ago it was all forest.

Before you cut anything down, you wanted to scout your eighty acres for the tallest, straightest trees for your cabin. Tulip poplar trees fit that plan because poplar had less limbs, was easy to work with your axe and adze, and poplar has more insect resistance than other species.

If you wanted a more airtight cabin, you wanted logs that were squared off (hewn logs). The cabin usually rested on a foundation of large field stones at the corners and midway points. As the logs for the walls were stacked, the corners were often dovetailed to hold them in place. A good "corner man" was imperative. A common size for the cabin was twenty feet by sixteen feet.

Once your walls were up, then you could decide where you wanted the door, window(s), and fireplace. The roof would be made from split slabs of oak or hard maple (clapboards) about four feet long and overlapped like shingles. Weighted poles held the clapboards in place. The floors were made of split logs called a puncheon floor.



Air spaces between the logs were filled with a mix of clay, cattails, and water called “chinking”. This same type of mix was used to line the fireplace and chimney as it was constructed from smaller logs. Lime made the mix even better. The chimney was loosely attached to the cabin so if it caught fire it could be pushed away from the structure.

Most of the pioneer furniture came when you transported the rest of the family to their new home. If you had no furniture, you made your own. Having a blacksmith in the neighborhood was good fortune so things like square nails, farm tools, and kitchen utensils could be procured. Provisions of sugar and salt could be found at John Conner’s trading post over east at Connersville.

Pioneer life really got rolling in Rush County because of the help of your neighbors. It took a lot of hands to do the cabin construction and barn raising. This same kind of neighborly cooperation later came in handy for butchering livestock, threshing grain, corn husking, and food preparation.

When you think about it, our towns and villages were constructed near a river or stream. Milroy, Moscow, Arlington, Carthage, Rushville, and other places were near water where people congregated. A water powered grist mill for grinding corn into cornmeal was the gathering point in these early communities.

Yes, living as a Rush County pioneer was not for the weak of heart. To top it off there was no toilet paper! Surely most of us can identify with that kind of inconvenience.

Next time I write, I want to focus on the “Father of Rush County”, William B. Laughlin.

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