

## First Settlers of DeKalb by Bryan Thompson

William Cooper arranged the purchase of De Kalb in February of 1803. He wasted no time in beginning the settlement of the township. By mid May 1803 he left Cooperstown with a party of settlers. The settlers brought with them the supplies they would need to start new homes in the wilderness. Cooper even arranged for goods to stock a store in the new community to be shipped at the same time.

The supplies for the store were transported by water as the roads to the north were so poor. These supplies were shipped up the Mohawk River then transferred to Oneida Lake. From there they were shipped downstream on the Oneida and Otsego rivers to Lake Ontario. Then up the coast of Lake Ontario to the St. Lawrence River eventually arriving at Ogdensburg. From Ogdensburg the boat continued up the Oswegatchie River to the sight of the present Old De Kalb Village. This was a slow trip and not without it's dangers. According to a letter from T. B. Benedict to Cooper in December 1806 a shipment of store goods on the same route was shipwrecked at Sandy Creek and two men died!

Cooper sent these goods under the care of Alexander McCollum, who was to run the store in the new settlement. He was accompanied by Potter Goff and Stephen Cook. Judge Cooper, in a grandiose gesture that was typical of his style of entrepreneurship, lead the settlement party himself. He and the remaining 30 settlers left Cooperstown in 2 wagons each pulled by a team of horses and an ox cart pulled by two yoke of oxen. Accounts of the parties passage through Lowville show Judge Cooper rode in the ox cart while the majority of the settlers walked along beside the heavily laden wagons.

The party traveled north from Cooperstown past their old homes in the Towns of Otsego and Richfield to the Cherry Valley Turnpike and thence North through Utica and on through the Black River country. The roads were several years old and fairly well established until they reached Long Falls (Carthage).

At Long Falls they had to be ferried across the Black River. The New State Road began here. The highway was built in 1802 to connect Ogdensburg with the Black River Country.

The State highway was nothing like the highways of today. The order from the state directed that all trees less than 18 inches in diameter be chopped. Trees larger than this were to be girdled. When Cooper's party traveled the route in 1803, these larger trees, of which there would have been many in a virgin forest,

would hardly have been dead. One can imagine the slow pace traveling on a muddy, black fly infested, spring road dodging large trees:

After several days, the party arrived at the clearing of Abram Vrooman near Oxbow. The traveling had been so difficult up to this point the decision was made to lighten the wagons by rafting some of the goods from Oxbow down the Oswegatchie River to De Kalb. Jehiel Dimick, Salmon Rich, John Hewlett and Ralph R. Bell left the party here to float the raft downstream over rapids to De Kalb.

The 27 remaining settlers continued on the Old State Road through what are now Rossie and Macomb. They managed to travel 5 miles that day. They camped for the night in an abandoned shanty. The mosquitoes were so bad they lit a nearby dead birch on fire to keep the bugs away. In the night a cry awakened the members of the party just in time to escape before the tree fell on the shanty crushing and burning it along with their bedding.

The next day the party traveled on to what is now De Peyster. Two and one half miles from the town line of Macomb Samuel Bristol had erected a small log dwelling public house in November 1802 at the urging of Judge Ford.

This seven month old Inn became the temporary home of the party. For the next seven days the men of the party worked to build a road to the new settlement. Clearing trees and crossing Beaver Creek and eventually fording the Oswegatchie River. Although the record doesn't mention them it is certain the 5 women in the party were equally busy chopping wood, cleaning, cooking and the other unmentioned chores of women of that era.

Finally "arriving on the 12th of June 1803, with the other parties, at the present village of De Kalb. On the first day, they put up the body of a house, and slept without a roof over their heads, the first night. On the second day, another house was built, and on the third day, a store." (Hough page 289). One can sense the great relief and accomplishment these settlers must have felt after a month on the road to be at their destination and have shelter!

Who were these first settlers? Where did they come from?

Franklin Hough in his 1853 History of St. Lawrence and Franklin Counties lists them as follows: William Cooper, Salmon Rich, Isaac Stacy, Eseck Whipple, Richard MerriI1, Elisha Cook, William Brown, Gardner Brown, William Stone, Asa Ransom, Timothy Utley, Elijah Utley, Abner Wright, Andrew McCollom, Asa Ransom jr., James Farr, Elijah Farr, Farr's wife (Ruth Sprague Farr), Farr's wife's

sister (Olive Sprague), Joseph Woodhouse, William Woodhouse, Dr. Robert Campbell, Ralph R. Bell, Bell's wife (Desire Keziah Reynolds Bell), Bell's Sister (Nancy Bell) Bell's Daughter, Elijah Stockwell, Jehiel Dimick, John Hewlett (Hulett), William Sloan, Alexander McCollom, Potter Goff, Stephen Cook.

Hough's list, made 50 years after the settlement, is not complete. The female settlers were listed only as "Farr's Wife" etc. I have included the names of the women in parenthesis where I have been able to determine who they were. Judge Cooper's accounting for the trip in 1803 mentions buying supplies for 40 men.

Of the 34 people accounted for above, only 13 remained in the town in 1810 and only 8 in 1820. These settlers were all living in Otsego County in 1800. Most in the townships of Otsego and Richfield. All but three were born in New England.

Many of the members of the party were recruited by Cooper to perform some essential task in setting up the settlement and left as soon as their work was completed. Among these were: Dr. Robert Campbell surveyor and MD. Asa Ransom Sr. and Asa Ransom Jr. Others such as Abner Wright were land speculators that soon moved further West.

Andrew and Alexander McCollom, two brothers, were hired by Cooper to be land agent and store keeper respectively. They were soon fired by the Judge and moved out of the town. Andrew in October 1803 moved his law practice to Ogdensburg. Alexander married Olive Sprague and was fired as storekeeper in 1804.

Ralph Rudolph Bell and his family moved 5 times in 5 years before finally leaving the township. His wanderlust eventually led him to Michigan.

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Stephen and Elisha Cook moved to Jefferson County in 1808.

Elijah Utley sold his distillery and moved to Ontario county the same year.

Joseph Woodhouse, house carpenter, and Jehiel Dimick moved to Ogdensburg in 1808 and left there at the opening of the War of 1812. Dimmock was killed in the war.

The War of 1812 caused many local residents to flee. Among the first settlers who left the town at this time were: William Woodhouse, William Sloan, Timothy Utley and John Hulett.

Following the War and the Cooper family's bankruptcy, Potter Goff left for Ohio and Richard Merrill moved to Fowler. Those members of the original party who were living in the town in 1820 were; Salmon Rich, Isaac Stacy, Eseck Whipple, William Brown, James Farr, Elijah Farr, Ruth Sprague Farr and Elijah Stockwell. There is one other person, Elijah Stockwell's wife who may have been a ninth member of the original party. A March 16, 1808 letter from Thomas B. Benedict to Judge Cooper states, "Be not surprised when I inform you that governor Elijah Stockwell has been to Vermont, and After a courtship of four days has married Bell's Wife's Sister and has got her on the patent." Could this woman be the Bell's sister (Nancy Bell) of Hough's list? (If anyone has any information about this please contact the author.)

Many others quickly joined the original settlers. The population of the Township of De Kalb was 541 in 1810 more than double that of nearby Gouverneur at that time! This rapid early growth must be attributed to the planning of William Cooper and these hardy settlers hard work.

#### Sources

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