

## THE FIRST SETTLERS OF KEENE

Prior to August 5, 1839, the lands in Keene township, Ionia county, were not offered for sale by the general government, and although settlers came on pre-empted, and occupied tracts before that period, and set forward at once to clear and improve the lands so occupied, they were, technically speaking, simply squatters, although, as a matter of fact, they had come to stay, and were settlers just as much as though they had owned their lands. Of course, they had no more legal rights than others had, as concerned the ultimate purchase of the land, and were liable to be ousted by designing persons (and such persons were by no means lacking in those days) but the Keene pioneers knew their moral rights in the matter and proposed to maintain them. They formed an association for their mutual protection, and chose Asa L. Spencer, of Otisco, to represent them. Such a move was necessary, since there were always hordes of land-speculators about land-offices ready and eager to pounce upon and buy lands improved by squatters or preempters at the earliest opportunity, and then the original occupant, finding himself liable to be cast out of his place that another might reap the benefit of what improvements had been made, had no alternative but to make the best terms he could with the scheming speculator.

The early settlers knew how matters were liable to work in that respect, and not only took concerted action to protect themselves, but gave it freely to be understood that it would not be very healthy for any speculator, or anybody else, to turn his energies towards depriving the actual possessors of the lands they had already selected and commenced to improve. The consequence of such positive action was that when the land-sale took place at Ionia, in August, 1839, there was no attempt made to disturb Keene settlers.

The first "commencement" made in Keene was on section 25, and on that section the first permanent settlement in the town was effected. The commencement alluded to was made in the fall of 1837 by two young unmarried men, by names Orrin Owens and Charles Hickok, of Monroe Co., N. Y. They doubtless intended to make a settlement at some time, for they put up a shanty, and chopped away as though the only object in life was the hewing down of forests. Whether they grew tired of the business, whether they concluded that pioneering was not much fun after all, or whether they determined to pioneer in some other locality, cannot be said; but it can be said that they did not become very early permanent settlers in Keene, and so may be briefly dismissed.

The first actual settler in the town was Edward Butterfield, who, with Cyrus Ross, cleared some land in 1837, and Feb. 2, 1838, settled with his family on section 36. In 1836, also, what is still known, by the older people in the township as the "Canadian Settlement" was founded by James Monk, who came from Canada and in March of that year located on section 26. In April, Morton Reynolds, also a Canadian, came to section 27, followed by John Follett, another Canadian, who made his home on section 36. In the same year John Conner, from Oakland county, pitched his tent on section 35; James Crysler, from Canada, on section 26; Samuel Wells, from St. Lawrence county, N. Y., on section 23 (in May); and Dexter Cutler, in June, near Flat river, on section 6. Charles Higgins settled about the same time in Cutler's neighborhood, on section 7.

In 1838 or 1839, William Lott, a bachelor, came to section 30, and there in a little while opened what he was pleased to call a tavern, but which was nothing more than a place where travelers were treated to such refreshments as poor whiskey could provide, and whereas, on a pinch, they were kept over-night. The occasion of Lott's embarking in the enterprise was the opening of a stage route between Ionia and Grand Rapids over the road on which Lott's shanty stood. The stage route was a popular highway before the opening of the old Detroit and Milwaukee Railroad, and for a time two four-horse coaches passed over it daily, while there was considerable other travel as well. With the completion of the railway, in 1857, the traffic fell to the ordinary country road level. Until that time, however, Lott flourished as a dispenser of fire-water on the route. In addition to that distinction, he won the perhaps better one of being the first person to erect a framed house in Keene, his lumber coming from the Fallasburg mill, in Kent county. His house was put up in 1842, and, the year following, Samuel Wells built on section 23, where D. C. Johnson later lived, the first frame barn in the township. He got his lumber at the Bellamy mill, in Easton.

There was another so-called tavern on the south town-line road, in section 35, over which one Johnson held sway as landlord. That road was at first the main traveled road between Ionia and Grand Rapids, but upon the opening of the stage-route north of there the tide of travel was transferred, and Johnson's occupation was as a boniface fled forever.

A prominent member of the Canadian settlement in Keene was Elijah Sprague, who in the summer of 1839 made a settlement with his family, followed closely by Phillip Monk and James Baird, likewise from Canada.

This year of 1839, in which the lands of Keene were put upon the market, saw a material accession to the settlement, and the town began to develop rapidly. Thomas Beattie and his son, Nathaniel, came to the county in 1839, and at the land-sale, in August, Nathaniel bought a place in Keene, to which his father and son removed in the fall from the Dye farm, in Easton, where they had been temporarily abiding. In 1840 the elder Beattie bought a farm (which was for a good many years occupied by his son, Robert) where he died in 1860. James Beattie, brother to Robert, was also a resident in Keene, on section 25. When Nathaniel Beattie came to the town with his father he found David and Stephen Chaul, two bachelor brothers, keeping house, each in a shanty, on the place which was later owned by Hiram S. Lee. Other settlers of 1839 were John L. Covert, Jennison Henry, Simon Heath and Nathaniel Davenport.

In June 1840, Zeletus B. Frost, William Sparks and Ephraim Abbot, of Courtland Co., N. Y., came to Michigan in search of land, and, finding in Keene what they wanted, in the land line, made locations on section 15—Sparks and Frost each a forty, and Abbot an eighty-acre lot. All went back to New York as soon as they had completed their land purchases, and in October, 1840, Abbott, Frost, Ephraim Abbott, Jr., and Stephen Sparks, with their families, set out in company for Keene. Abbott, leaving the rest of the party at Buffalo and pushing on through Canada (while they proceeded by the lakeway to Detroit) reached Keene some days before them, and, moving into an abandoned shanty on section 24, he and his son, Ephraim, began at once the work of clearing and cabin-building upon the Abbott eighty in section 15.

Eight days after Abbott's arrival, along came his friends, and into the old shanty they went; so that, all told, the occupants of that exceedingly small inhabitation numbered a total of twelve persons, and in it they managed to live two weeks. At night the floor of the one room was just about covered with the beds necessary for the twelve, but in the morning, by piling the beds in a heap, sufficient room was made to allow the womenfolks to get about in the performance of their household duties.

In the northern half of the town there were but few settlers when Abbott, Frost, and Sparks came upon the scene. Schools, they had none, and, indeed, needed none, for schoolchildren were scarce, and when they wanted to go to a meeting they could not get there short of the Welch school house in Easton. Sparks became a famous hunter, and as a slayer of deer and bears was known all over.

In the spring of 1846, Ephriam Abbott, Jr., set up a shop on section 15 and began to make barrels, tubs, and sap-buckets, much to the convenience of his fellow settlers, and much, it is hoped, to his own profit.

James Day, a settler in Oakland county in 1835, moved to Keene in June, 1841, accompanied by his two grown sons, Cyrenus and Allen, each of whom made a land purchase in the town, on section 28 and 27. Yaccheus H. Brower, a New Yorker, came to the town in 1840, and made a commencement on an eighty acre lot in section 13.

Among the other early settlers in Keene township were Delos Gibson, George W. White, A. C. Smith, Ira Pinckey, a settler from Oakland county, J. W. Sprague and Harlow Sprague (brothers), Joseph Gardner, C. C. Sayles, George Sayles, Elias Sayles, Chas. Sayles, George Denton, Harvey H. Vinton, Phillip Marble, G. N. Jackson, and the Carrs, including the father and his sons, James, John and George. In 1844 came Gilbert Ayers, and, in 1845, Vine Welch, Roland Hull, Isreal Bowen, Oliver Bowen, James Bowen, and Alpheus Bowen. C. C. Hunter came in 1846 from Oakland county.

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C. O. Willits, M. D.

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