

Early Palestine

Editors Note - This history of early Palestine was written by Max Thompson and distributed by the Chamber of Commerce to the travel-writers that toured Palestine recently.

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The Saga of Captain John LaMotte

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When LaSalle decided to spend the winter in the area now called Chicago, on Lake Michigan, he sent a detail to build a ship and bring the cache of supplies he had left on the shores of Lake Erie to the camp at Fort Dearborn wher LaSalle was camping. Captain John (Jaques) LaMotte was in charge. He proceeded to Lake Erie and built the 'Griffin', picked up the cache, and started for Fort Dearborn. American history says the Griffin was destroyed in a terrible storm and all hands and supplies lost. Not so says the Saga.

Captain John and some of his Indian guides floated ashore and salvaged some supplies. Being afraid to face LaSalle, he and the Indians, using the local rivers and a four-mile portage, traveled toward Vincennes on the Wabash. But Vincennes was also a French settlement and he might be unwelcome there so when he arrived in this vicinity he liked the 'Milk and Honey Land' and established a trading post here. There were many descendants who stayed in this general neighborhood from 1678 until the death of Joseph LaMotte at the hands of the Indians about 1812. Palestine claims to be the oldest town in the state on this LaMotte Trading Post which is thought to have been continuously operated by the LaMotte family.

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Palestine was plotted in 1818 and became the principle settlement in this part of Illinois. On May 11, 1820, the Land Office was established here, and all the land had to be enered in this office. Many industries were her. In 1830 when Lincoln passed through town there were 600 inhabitants and a land office, 5 dry goods stores, 2 groceries, 2 saddle shops, 1 cooperage, 3 blacksmith shops, 1 carpenter shop, 1 cabinet shop, 1 wagon shop, 1 tailor shop, 1 hattershop, 2 boot shops, 2 tan yards, 2 grist mills with distilleries (no money to pay for grindinggrist so miller took grain for pay, distilled grain, and sol it back to farmers. Money was available for whiskey. Balance of the whiskey was shipped flatboat to New Orleans.), 1 cotton gin, 1 carding mill, 1 oil mill for linseed and castor oil, two taverns and one church.

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Fort LaMotte was built in 1811 to protect settlers from Indians stirred up by the English before and during the War of 1812. Fort LaMotte became the nucleus of the Village of Palestine after peace. We do not know when the first English settlers came here but was probably about 1800.

The Land Office established in 1822 closed in 1855. During this period Robert Kinzie purchased 102 acres for \$127.00 which became part of the Loop in Chicago. He could have had an additional 58 acres but refused. He said 'no need'.

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PALESTINE - 'THE RAILROAD TOWN'

In 1854 a sum of \$60,000 was raised, mostly in this part of the county, to build the Wabash Valley Railroad. The money was squandered and the railroad was never finished. Some of the old grade is still visible. About 15 years later an east and west railroad, commonly called the Narrow Gauge, was built. I believe the letters used as a name were S.E. & S.E. or something like that. The road was built by a man who was always dressed formally in a cutaway coat and high silk hat. He carried a box of stogie cigars. His flattery and affability, plus a bundle of worthless script (so the legend goes) built a railroad from Effingham to Sullivan, Indiana. The road was a Narrow Gauge. It did well until after a few years the river washed the bridge east of Palestine. The freight had to be transferred by ferry and reloaded on the train on the other side of the river. This broke the road and it was sold to the Illinois and Indiana Southern. The bridge was rebuilt. About 1900 the I & I S was sold to Illinois Central. For many years Palestine was a terminal and there were 350 or more regularly employed and 40 or more trains were scheduled out of Palestine each day, at the peak. Teh diesels put this terminal about out of existence as only a few trains now leave here daily.

In the Kitchell Cemetery lies the body of the fifth governor, General Othneil Looker, who was a veteran of the Revolutionary War. He enlisted as a private and was discharged a Captain. Later in the Ohio Frontier war with Indians he served with General St. Clair. He then became a general in the Ohio National Guard, he was Leut. Governor when the current governor resigned to accept a cabinet position. Looker became governor in March and served until November. Beaten for re-election, he came to Palestine to be near his daughter, Jos. Kitchell. He died and was buried here.

Governor French, first governor to be re-elected was receiver for the land office. He lived here for a while and was living here when elected governor. He had a beautiful home south-west of Palestine.

Palestine is blessed with an underground lake of water lying in a bed of gravel that is classed as very pure. The volume is practically in-exhaustible and furnishes water for Palestine, Robinson, Oblong, and for waterflooding much of the oil fields of Crawford County.

Timber from our area is in great demand in Europe for fine furniture. It brings a fine bonus when sold for this purpose.

The Wabash has been famous for the fine mussel shell and beautiful pearls found in the river. Fortunes were sometimes pulled out of the river in a single pearl.

The early settlers enjoyed sassafras tea made from the roots of the sassafras tree. Sassafras is used to flavor rootbeer. It still grows in our woods and along country roads. Yes, this is Sassafras Country.

This is also mushroom country. In April the woods are full of people looking for the morell or sponge mushrooms.

Today Palestine is proud of its beautiful village and the citizens who work so hard to improve our town. The arena houses and our annual RCA Championship Rodeo each Labor Day weekend. It was built with volunteer labor and funds donated by people of Palestine and Crawford County.

Palestine
Register "

May 16, 1973

Old Christian Church

This church was built in 1874 and was the first brick building built in this part of the State. It was used until the new church was built across the street in 1916. The timbers of this structure are heavy hardwood, put together with mortise and wooden pin construction that are most interesting to modern viewers. It is truly a fine example of master craftsmanship.

Bristol Landing

In the years before the railroads came the grain and meat produced in this area as well as about all the merchandise used by the settlers was transported by river boats and rafts. The Wabash was a large river then and river traffic was very important to the pioneers. Bristol Landing was the port of call for Palestine. Grain and cured and salt meats were shipped down the river and all kinds of merchandise was brought back to Palestine. Large warehouses and wharves made it possible to transport huge quantities each way. The coming of the railroads ended the river traffic but the economic condition of the Wabash Valley would be greatly enhanced by a navigable river today.

The large bronze bell in the Presbyterian Church belfrey was shipped here on a river boat in 1849. Its tone is so clear that it is possible to hear it for 8-10 miles when conditions are right.

Palestine was the first town in the State that bought wheat, packed pork, and had the first grist mill operated by a tread mill.

There is a story told of a minister who chided a local distiller for making and shipping whiskey down river. Now this minister was very biggoted. So the distiller told him the whiskey was being shipped to New Orleans to kill the Catholics. This pacified the minister.

Mrs. Kelley!

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May 10

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B.L.I.C.