



Mile 146

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Topeka's Oldest Business: J.W. Priest & Son

Lumber and the abundant hardwoods has been a major factor in the development of Topeka. Initially the land had to be cleared for farming, but that also provided much needed logs and slab lumber for homes. There was a very good reason why the Hawpach came to be known as Slabtown. That nickname apply described the primary commerce of the area. It is thought that Timothy Hudson Jr. and his brother William may have started the first commercial sawmill in 1856. In 1874, it was purchased and moved by John Keim who continued to operate it until at least 1882. Many of the details related to the growth of the timber industry have been lost in history. We do know that by the turn of the century there were numerous sawmills in the area and the Sumner Dowell Lumber Company was selling building supplies.

On a farm near Montpelier, Ohio, John W. Priest was born on June 20, 1868, to Joel and Catherine Priest. Joel was active in the sawmill and lumber business in Williams County. As a



JOHN W. PRIEST



LeRoy Priest

young man John started working for the Wabash Railroad and in 1905 was named the station agent in Topeka. No doubt influenced by his father's vocation, it didn't take long for John to recognize a great opportunity; purchasing 1/2 interest in Sumner Dowell. By 1918, he had purchased the remainder of the company and J.W. Priest & Son was born. His son, LeRoy "Roy", who graduated from Topeka High School in 1917, joined the business after college and serving in the military. LeRoy worked together with his father until John's death in 1944, at which time he took over the business. At the time of his death, J.W. Priest was the V.P. of Farmers State Bank and a 32nd degree Scottish Rite Mason.

LeRoy carried on his father's business with the help of Bernard Roy and Bonnie (Roy) Miller, until his death in 1964. Priest suffered a heart attack while raking leaves at his home on South Main Street.

For the next 14 years Bernie Roy operated the lumber yard on behalf of the L.G. Priest Trust. In 1978, along with is son Fred and son-in-law Randy Seniff, Roy purchased the business. Unfortunately Roy would also fall victim to a heart attack and die in 1984, leaving Fred to manage the business. In 1987, Fred purchased all interests in the lumber yard and continues to operate as J.W. Priest & Son, Inc. His son, Scott, also works in the family business as does his cousin Bonnie Miller (THS Class of 1950). Bonnie, who runs the office, started working at the lumber yard the day after returning from her senior trip.



L- R: Fred, Bonnie, Scott

In This Issue

- Topeka's Oldest Business
- Hawpach History Detectives Report
- Revolutionary War Hero
- Track Notes
- Grant Update
- Quiz

HG



Hawpatch *History Detectives* **Investigative Report**

Your Hawpatch History Detectives have uncovered a number of interesting items over the last few weeks.

1) Alma Blomkvist: Jackie Brennan, who along with her husband Patrick, donated Alma Blomkvist's trunk to the historical society, has, to our delight, sent us Alma's wedding dress. We are hoping to locate a picture of Alma sometime in the future. Jackie has also discovered what happened to Alma's son, Tom Kelley. .

Tom and his wife Bernice lived in Munster, Indiana. They had no children. Tom worked for International Harvester. According to Bernice's nephew, Tom Cornwell, the Kelleys moved to Arizona where Tom died. It was Bernice who gave the trunk to the Brennans. The nephew also said that Tom Kelley was originally from Ligonier.

2) Hawpatch Churches — Civil War: According to the township map in the 1874 Atlas of LaGrange County the Methodist Episcopal (M.E.) church west of Honeyville was called the Salem Church. A large number of those who attended the church were Lutherans from Ohio, Pennsylvania and the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. Since there was no Lutheran church in the area they joined the Methodists.

We have also learned from the history of the St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church entitled "The Fish Lake Story", that the split occurred at the beginning of the Civil War when 44 people left the ME church. Apparently, "the Methodist minister was so vehement in his support of the Union that he completely alienated some of the former Southerners in the congregation". The group that left found a Presbyterian minister by the name of J.M. Schultz who served them for several months. In 1862, Rev. John G. Biddle, the pastor of Mt. Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church in LaGrange, was invited to preach. He would be their pastor for the next 9 or 10 years.

Ironically in spite of the split, Biddle and his new flock were able to use the Methodist building for services. On April 4, 1862, with 24 charter members, the Fish Lake Union Congregation of Evangelical Lutheran Church was organized. Things went smoothly until 1877 when controversy arose over the continued use of the Methodist Church building by two separate congregations.

The Lutherans moved their meeting place to the home of David Showalter and decided to build a church of their own. Land was purchased in May of 1878, for \$50.00 from Matthias Goodyear about 300 yards North of the Methodist Church, but on the Elkhart County side of the road. The new building was completed and dedicated on October 6, 1878. At that time the church officially became St. John at Fish Lake Lutheran Church.

When the M.E. congregation closed their building and joined the Eden Chapel group one mile west of Hawpatch is not clear. It had to be in the period between 1877 and 1895 when the Methodist built a new meetinghouse on Pine Street in Topeka. Interestingly enough, one of the stain glass windows bears the of name of W.H. Poyser who was a founding member of the Salem M.E. Church west of Honeyville.

3) Dr. John Brown: According to the Ligonier Presbyterian Church website, John Brown was received as a member of the newly formed Presbyterian Church in 1837. On April 1st of 1840 he was ordained as a ruling elder and the church's name was changed to the Haw Patch Presbyterian Church. The exact location of the church building is not known. We do know that it was organized in the home of William McConnell sometime before 1835. McConnell was an early Justice of the Peace as well as the first postmaster of Hawpatch. In 1835, he performed the marriage of Minerva Gaines and Norman Sessions Sr. Their son, Norman Jr., would later service in the Civil War.

4) In 1856, two of Dr. Brown's step-nephews, Timothy Jr. and William Hudson, built what may have been the first saw mill in Slabtown on the Hawpatch. Their parents, Timothy Sr. and Catherine (Brown) Hudson lived out their lives in Hawpatch. Catherine was a step daughter to Chloe Brown (last newsletter). Timothy Sr. died in 1871 and Catherine in 1885. Both are buried in the Eden Cemetery along side of Chloe Brown and her son Dr. John Brown.

HG

Photo to the Right: On October 10, 1958, at about 6:40 AM a semi-truck drove into the path of a west-bound Wabash freight train, powered by engine #89. The accident occurred on SR 5, two miles west of Topeka. The semi driver was killed. All 23 cars and both diesel units ended up in a pile within the space of 200 ft. Train cars were stacked 4 and 5 deep and 200 feet of tracks had to be replaced. They figure the engine was going 47 to 48 mph and the truck 50 to 55 mph. No one on the train died, but one person was taken to the LaGrange Hospital.

Track Talk:



Schedule of Events:

January 18, 2011

Memorable Moments in Topeka History
Topeka Branch Library (6:30 pm)

March 15, 2011

The History of the Topeka Fire Department
Topeka Branch Library (6:30 pm)

April 2011

The Depot Museum reopens on Saturdays from
9am to noon. Admission is FREE



“All A Board” with 2011 Membership

T.A.H.S. membership is only \$10.00 a year

- Receive the quarterly newsletter
- Help us provide newsletters to 3rd Graders

TAHS Quiz

1. In what two wars did Walter Denny serve?
2. Who married Norman & Minerva Sessions?
3. When was Dr. John Brown ordained as a ruling elder in the Hawpatch Presbyterian Church?
4. What was the name of the Methodist Episcopal church west of Honeyville?
5. When did J.W. Priest become station agent in Topeka?

“We Made it!”

The Matching Challenge Grant of \$25,000 has been met thanks to the generosity of many people. As of September 21st, 2010 we have received \$25,891.00 toward the matching grant.

Our anonymous benefactor has also been true to his word. Plans are to establish a sustainability endowment fund where the interest money can be used to supplement the Historical Society's annual budget. While this does not solve all the financial issues, it does give us a solid footing that we have not had before.

“Thank you” to everyone who gave.



Photo taken by Red Haggard

Answers: 1) Revolutionary War and the War of 1812; 2) William McConnell; 3) 1840; 4) Salem; 5) 1905

Topeka Area Historical Society

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Revolutionary War Hero at Home on the Hawpatch



It started out as an ordinary phone call, but Mary McCormick's question turned into an amazing adventure. "What can you tell me about Walter Denny and do you know where he is buried?" Who was Walter Denny anyway and why should I care about where he is buried? Well, it didn't take long for me to figure out that I wanted to know more about this early settler on the Hawpatch.

When Mary, who is with the LaGrange County chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), told me that Denny was a veteran of the Revolutionary War she immediately had my undivided attention. She said that according to the LaGrange County Centennial 1828-1928 history, Walter Denny lived west of Hawpatch with his son John.. Supposedly Denny had been with George Washington at Valley Forge and had also crossed the Delaware River with the father of our country. Their group wanted to find his grave and place a marker on it. Could I help them?

That was enough for me. Imagine that, a Revolutionary War veteran living right here in Topeka. I had to find out all I could about this Walter Denny.

According to the LaGrange County Centennial 1828-1928 history, Walter Denny was living with his son John two miles west of Hawpatch and a half mile south. Today that would be on State Road 5 around CR 750 South. That history records that he came here with his son John. It also states that he did spend the winter with Washington at Valley Forge and was indeed a part of the memorable crossing of the Delaware.

I also learned that he was born on March 3, 1756, in

Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. He died on March 31, 1842, at the age of 91 and was buried in the Jackson Cemetery in Elkhart County on "the old trail" (U.S. 33) near Benton, Indiana.

The Pennsylvania Archives record that Walter Denny was a Captain of the 7th Company, 2nd Battalion of the Cumberland County Militia in 1777 under a Colonel Davis. Then as a private in the 5th Company, 2nd Battalion, Cumberland County, Pennsylvania on September 10, 1781, he was commissioned as a Captain for bravery at Yorktown. He also served in the War of 1812 and was cited for bravery at Harrisburg, PA on March 29, 1814. Walter Denny was indeed a twice decorated war hero.

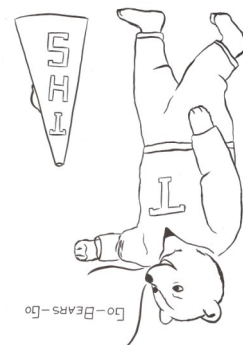
It was in 1837 that Walter's son, Dr. John Denny settled in Hawpatch. Dr. John, his wife Mary and their three children put down roots in Section 35 of Eden Township where he had an office. They purchased 160 acres of virgin forest from Robert Latta for \$600. It is said that the trees were so numerous that it was difficult to drive between them. According to the 1880 census, Mary, 83 years old, was still

living on the Denny homestead. John and Mary Denny are said to be buried in the Eden Cemetery west of Topeka, but their names do not appear in the county cemetery records.

The Denny's also played an important role in the Presbyterian Church in Hawpatch. According to the Ligonier Presbyterian Church website, John & Mary shared half of their house (rent free) with Rev. J. Wolff for about a year. On April 1, 1840, the church officially became the Hawpatch Presbyterian Church. Where the building was located is still a mystery. *(Can anyone help us out here?)* **HG**



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