

# NUGGETS of HISTORY

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## THREE JUNIOR HISTORIANS

by Jayne E. Borden

On September 20, the annual picnic meeting of the Rockford Historical Society was held in Sinnissippi Park. After a delicious potluck, three students from Wilson Middle School presented their 'superior' award-winning history projects. They are students of board member Russ Miller.

Terry Johnson displayed his replica of the Berry-Lincoln Store of New Salem, Illinois, 1833. Shelves were stocked with mittens, furs, caps, cooking pots, glassware, and other useful items. Also, there were guns, ox yokes, pitchforks, shovels, plows, wagon wheels, and brooms...all in miniature. Terry told about the early life of Abraham Lincoln centering around the store.



Terry Johnson's  
Replica of the  
Berry-Lincoln Store  
at New Salem

Tim Olson informed the group about the Winnebago County Courthouse, Past and Present. His drawings of the three courthouses, built in 1844, 1876, and 1972, were mounted on a turntable where each side illustrated the progression of the three different buildings, from a very modest beginning to the French Venetian architectural style, to the modern lines of the present structure. The four statues which adorned the second courthouse were also included in this display; formed from clay, about eight inches high, by Tim. "Charity" is now standing inside the new entrance, and the other three -- "Justice", "Mercy", and "Law" -- are on the grounds of the Wagon Wheel near Rockton.

Greg R. Larson exhibited his work entitled "A Glorious Moment in History -- The Rockford and Interurban Railway

ROCKFORD WOMAN WRITTEN UP IN NATIONAL MAGAZINE  
by Hazel M. Hyde

Research by Mrs. Robert Lacy Jackson, National Chairman, Yorktown Bicentennial Committee, and Mollie Somerville, Historical Researchist, NSDAR, revealed that Mrs. Luther Derwent of Rockford was a prime mover in preserving buildings at Yorktown. And quoting from DAUGHTERS OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION MAGAZINE, January 1981, page 16, we find this statement about the sixth Rockford Chapter DAR regent, whose life was researched recently, by this writer:

"At the 22nd Continental Congress in April, 1913, the first interest in Yorktown shown by the National Society, Daughters of the American Revolution, is recorded in the report of Mrs. Luther Derwent of Illinois, Chairman of the Preservation of Historic Spots: --

"Every true American should some day make a pilgrimage to Yorktown. What name is more vividly recalled from our childhood's past? The place where Cornwallis surrendered to Washington. I cannot write a report without quoting two stanzas of a poem written by one of our own Daughters. I think I say it in my sleep.

"Oh Daughters of Heroic sires,  
Come stand on Yorktown's sacred plain,  
And read its story once again.  
Here a new nation sprung to life,  
And without faltering or fear,  
That day began its grand career."

"Right in Yorktown, in the shadow of the Nelson home, is where I became truly patriotic, willing to work in the interest of the Daughters of the American Revolution, not only as a Chair-woman but as charwoman."

This is an excerpt from the report that was made by Emma Wilder Derwent. The culmination of her zealous agitating is told in a rather long article. Plans are being made in 1981 for the Bicentennial Year of Yorktown. Celebrations are being planned that will be as near the 19th of October as possible.

WINNEBAGO COUNTY'S FIRST EXECUTION  
by Robert H. Borden

Sheriff John F. Taylor was nearing the end of his term that November day in 1856. A sheriff could not succeed himself in office, and a few days earlier a new sheriff had been elected. Soon John could return to his farm and spend more time with his young wife, who was again expecting, and with his little year-and-a-half old son, John Jr.

Born in New York state in 1825, Sheriff Taylor had arrived in Winnebago County from Warsaw, New York, about 1847. The 1850 census listed him as a farmer in Laona Township, but supposedly he had also been a school teacher for a time, according to a biographical sketch published



Tim Olson's Courthouse Project, Showing Three of the Miniature Statues Made of Clay

Company". Greg had designed a map of the area interurban lines to Beloit, Janesville, Belvidere, and Freeport, with a picture of a railway car in the upper left-hand corner, all crafted in needlepoint. The history narration and sound effects were played on a tape recorder.

Wilson Middle School emphasizes historical research within its curriculum and sponsors a history fair each year when the students display their individual endeavors. Then they bring their projects to the Northwest Regional Meeting of the Illinois Historical Society, and later to Washington, D.C., to participate in national competition.



Greg Larson's Exhibit, "A Glorious Moment in History -- The Rockford and Interurban Railway Company"



Sheriff John Taylor

after his death. He married Harriet Nettleton, ten years his junior and daughter of Moses and Phebe Nettleton who hailed from Canada. The Nettletons had a farm near Light-house Point in Ogle County, but in the 1850s Moses and his sons were operating a grist mill in Rockford and living on South Second Street.

The family of Solomon Countryman had lived on a farm in Franklin Township, DeKalb County, at the time of the 1850 census. By 1856 they had moved to Monroe Township in Ogle County. Solomon was forty-eight years old and his wife Margaret was forty-seven; both were illiterate. Six of their eight children had been born in New York state. Sidney Herrington, a former neighbor of the Countrymans in Dekalb County, was forty-six and a native of Vermont; his wife Polly, fifty years of age, was a New Yorker. Three of their seven children had been born in New York state before leaving for Illinois. Before the year 1856 had passed into history, the lives of the Taylor, Countryman, and Herrington families would be tragically intertwined.

About seven o'clock on the morning of Tuesday, November 11, 1856, Alfred Countryman, 26, and his brother John, 21, sons of Solomon and Margaret, approached Charles A. Upton, a butcher on West State Street across from the Court House, with seven cattle which they offered for sale. Upton was interested, and went out to the street in front of his market to look them over. He was not too impressed with their appearance, but chose three of the seven which he thought he might buy. Upton asked the price, and the Countrymans asked him to make an offer. Upton told them he wanted to hear their price before making an offer. Alfred Countryman finally suggested a price of \$55; Upton offered \$47, which Countryman accepted. Upton told Countryman he would have to deliver the cattle to the slaughter house

about a mile up the river. When Countryman objected to that, Upton said he would send a man along to help drive the cattle to the slaughter house, to which Countryman agreed.

After the Countrymans and Upton's employee had left with the cattle, Upton went looking for Sheriff Taylor, whom he finally found in the back of the jail. He told the sheriff he had just bought three cattle for \$47, and he felt they were worth at least \$75, leading him to believe they were stolen. After getting a description of the men, Sheriff Taylor set off in the direction of the slaughter house.

In the meantime, before heading for the slaughter house, the Countrymans had stopped to see Elisha Thompson, a butcher on South Church Street across from the courthouse square. Alfred told Thompson they had already sold three of the cattle, and he asked about \$80 for the other four. Thompson offered \$65, and Countryman accepted, but as with Upton it was necessary for the cattle to be delivered to the slaughter house. Thompson himself went along to be sure the cattle were delivered. When he returned to his market, Sheriff Taylor was waiting for him. Thompson had told the Countrymans he would have to go to the bank to draw out the money, so they were to meet later at the market. When they came to Thompson's market for their money, the sheriff was there, and told them, "When we buy cattle of strangers we require a bill of sale to make us safe." Thompson took out paper, pen, and ink, and drew up a bill of sale, which the Countrymans both signed, giving "Smith" as their surname. Sheriff Taylor asked them where they lived, and they replied that they lived about two miles east of New Milford. After a few more questions, during which time it was revealed that their name was not in fact Smith and some other answers were in conflict, Taylor informed them that he was the sheriff, a fact they apparently had not known, and that he was placing them under arrest until he could travel to the area where they claimed to live, and verify their stories.

Taylor then searched the brothers and found nothing but one bullet in Alfred's pocket. He told Alfred to hand over his revolver, but Alfred answered that he did not have any. Taylor searched him again in the usual manner, and finding nothing, asked Alfred how he happened to have the bullet in his pocket; his answer was that he had been out deer hunting a day or two before. Taylor and his deputy, William Thompson, then took the two brothers into custody and headed toward the jail at the northwest corner of South Church and Elm Streets. What Taylor did not realize was that Alfred had a single barrel rifle pistol concealed in a secret pocket in the front center of his trousers.

Just as they reached the jail steps, Alfred suddenly broke away from Taylor, leaped over the fence on Elm Street and ran eastward toward Main Street. Taylor started after him and was gaining. When the sheriff was only about five or six feet behind him, the prisoner reached into that center pocket, pulled out the pistol, and fired wildly behind



Cemetery Stone of  
Sheriff John F. Taylor  
in Greenwood Cemetery,  
Rockford, Illinois

him at his pursuer. The sheriff staggered a few paces and fell, calling out to bystanders to catch the prisoner. Those nearby picked Taylor up and carried him into a nearby stable, owned by Charles Hall and G. W. Reynolds, where he died almost immediately. According to the coroner's jury which later investigated the shooting, the pistol ball entered the sheriff's body between the third and fourth ribs on his left side, passed through his left lung, perforated the aorta and then passed through the right lung. Countryman's wild shot could not have done much more damage had he taken careful aim.

Reaching the corner of Elm and South Main Streets, the prisoner headed south. According to John Platt, the man who finally caught and disarmed him, Countryman had run into the yard of Elias Cospier at the corner of South Main and Kent Streets. The newspaper account stated that he fled into the woods in South Rockford. It may be that Cospier's yard was quite wooded, which was true of much of the city at that time. (This was several years before Elias Cospier built his large home on Cospier Place.)

Countryman was brought back to the jail. Some citizens were ready to hang him on the spot, but cooler heads prevailed, and he was jailed and put in irons to await trial. As another sheriff had already been elected a few days earlier, the county board met and decided that the newly-elected lawman should be installed early. Samuel I. Church, a forty-one-year-old blacksmith, had been elected on the Anti-Nebraska (Republican) ticket. Although the new Republican party did very well in Winnebago County in most offices, with the Republican Presidential candidate John C. Fremont receiving 3,627 votes to only 445 for James Buchanan, Church had squeaked by his rival, King H. Milliken, by



Monument of the Joseph  
Earl Family in the  
Lighthouse Point  
Churchyard. Harriett  
Nettleton Taylor later  
married Joseph Earl

less than 700 votes in the entire county, and in Rockford, Milliken had run ahead of Church 721 to 602.

Sheriff Taylor's funeral was held on Thursday, November 13, under the auspices of the Methodist Church and Rockford Lodge No. 102, Ancient Free and Accepted Masons. Rev. W. F. Stewart delivered the sermon, based on the 38th chapter of Isaiah. So many people attended that the funeral had to be held outdoors, and over 500 followed his remains to Greenwood Cemetery. Mrs. Taylor, the former Harriett Nettleton, remained a widow for several years. Her second son was born some time after her husband's death. The Nettleton family had returned to southern Ogle County and were living in the vicinity of Lighthouse Point in Nashua Township, where they attended Lighthouse Methodist Church. Also attending the Lighthouse Church, although farming in Taylor Township to the south, was Joseph Earl, his wife, the former Sarah Martin, and their four children. Another daughter was born to the Earls in October, 1859, but died July 17, 1860. Mrs. Sarah Earl died March 17, 1860. It was some time after Sarah's death that Joseph Earl remarried, taking as his second wife the sheriff's widow, Harriett Nettleton Taylor, who was fifteen years his junior.

The new Mrs. Earl was a great aunt of Miss Mary Hills, retired East Rockford High School English teacher. According to Miss Hills, Mrs. Earl's two sons were John, Jr., who had been a year and a half when his father was killed, and Merritt, who was born after his father's death. Merritt Taylor became a teacher at Leland Stanford University, according to Miss Hills. Harriett Earl died on October 2, 1871, at age thirty-six. Her husband Joseph lived until November 28, 1893, not quite reaching his 74th birthday.

Although Countryman was confined to his cell and



Moses Nettleton Family  
Monument in Lighthouse  
Point Churchyard

chained to the floor most of the time, occasionally in the cold of winter he would be allowed into the hall to warm himself by the stove. He took advantage of these occasions to heat a two-foot piece of iron and had succeeded in burning through one plank in the floor, in an attempt to escape before the smell of smoke caused a deputy sheriff's suspicions to be aroused. He was then confined to his cell at all times unless closely watched.

Alfred Countryman's trial began in circuit court on February 24, 1857, with Judge Benjamin R. Sheldon presiding; the preceding day had been occupied in choosing a jury. The jury consisted of Levi Tunks of Howard, Philo C. Watson of Rockford, Anthony M. Felmy of Owen, Silas G. Tyler of Rockford, Jacob B. Place of Howard, G. R. Ames of Harrison, Allen Rice of Harrison, Charles Works of Guilford, J. W. Jenks and J. W. Knapp of Roscoe, Edward Peppers of Howard, and S. P. Collier of Burrill. (Howard was the early name for Durand.) The prosecution was conducted by U. D. Meacham, state's attorney, and his assistant, William Brown. Defense counsel were Orrin Miller, Jr., and T. J. Turner.

It was brought out in the trial that the seven cattle the Countrymans were trying to sell in Rockford had been stolen from the farm of Sidney Herrington of Franklin Township, DeKalb County. In his testimony as a witness, Herrington claimed that early on a November morning Solomon Countryman, father of the prisoners, had come to the Herrington farm and asked if Herrington was missing any cattle. Upon investigation, he found that he was indeed missing five steers and two cows. Apparently Alfred and John had admitted the theft to their father when he had visited them in jail. Herrington arrived in Rockford just in time to rescue his animals from the slaughter house. The argument of the defense attorneys in the trial was that Taylor had been in error to arrest Countryman without a warrant, and



Lighthouse Methodist  
Church on Daysville  
Road in Ogle County

that Countryman's action was not premeditated, and therefore not first degree murder. The jury did not agree, and on Friday, March 6, the verdict of guilty was proclaimed.

On Saturday, March 7, 1857, Alfred Countryman was sentenced to be executed. Mr. Miller, one of his attorneys, immediately left for Springfield to get a stay of execution so a new trial could be held. According to Mary Hills, Merritt Taylor told her that his mother also made some effort to stop or delay the execution, believing that it was a wild accidental shot which had killed her husband and that it had probably been a desperate attempt to frighten him rather than to kill him. It was first rumored that the execution would take place at the County Fair Grounds, and this was undoubtedly a concern to Mrs. Taylor as well as others. The application for a stay of execution was refused. It was later announced that the County Fair Grounds would not be available for the hanging.

In announcing the sentence, Judge Sheldon finished with the following words: "The sentence of the court is that you, Alfred Countryman, be taken to the jail of this county, and detained in close custody until the twenty-seventh day of March instant; that on that day, between the hours of ten in the morning and five in the afternoon, you be taken thence to the place of execution in this county, and then and there be hung by the neck until you are dead. And may God have mercy on your soul."

Sheriff Church had the unpleasant duty of carrying out the execution, part of a sheriff's job in those days before the invention of electric chairs and gas chambers. Having been unable to obtain the use of the Fair Grounds for the execution, Church decided to have the scaffold built on land which he owned west of the city, on what is now School Street. His acreage included the land on which St. Patrick's Church, Convent, and School are now located.

According to the ROCK RIVER DEMOCRAT, people began crowding into the city the evening before the hanging, and two special trains arrived from the west about daybreak,

loaded with people from as far away as Dubuque. By 11 a.m. every available parking space in the downtown area was occupied by teams of horses and vehicles of all types, and the central part of the city, even to parts of the near east side, was a solid mass of humanity.

About noon, Fire Companies No. 1 and No. 2, having been deputized by Sheriff Church as a special guard, arrived in the jail yard and formed in two lines, No. 1 on the left armed with sabers, and No. 2 on the right armed with carbines. A special constable was assigned to march by the side of each fireman. A procession of horse-drawn vehicles was then formed, almost like a Memorial Day or Fourth of July parade. In the first carriage rode some members of the county bar and most of the county officers, including Sheriff Church. In the second vehicle came the convicted prisoner; Rev. Hooper Crews, a Methodist minister and religious counsel to the prisoner; defense counsel Orrin Miller, Jr.; and two deputy sheriffs. Coroner H. T. Mesler rode in the third carriage, accompanied by Drs. D. G. Clark, William Lyman, and Lucius Clark. The city marshal of Chicago and reporters from the Chicago TRIBUNE, Rockford REGIS-TER, and Rock River DEMOCRAT were in the fourth vehicle, while in the fifth rode Mr. Solomon Countryman together with a brother (probably John), sister, and cousin of the prisoner.

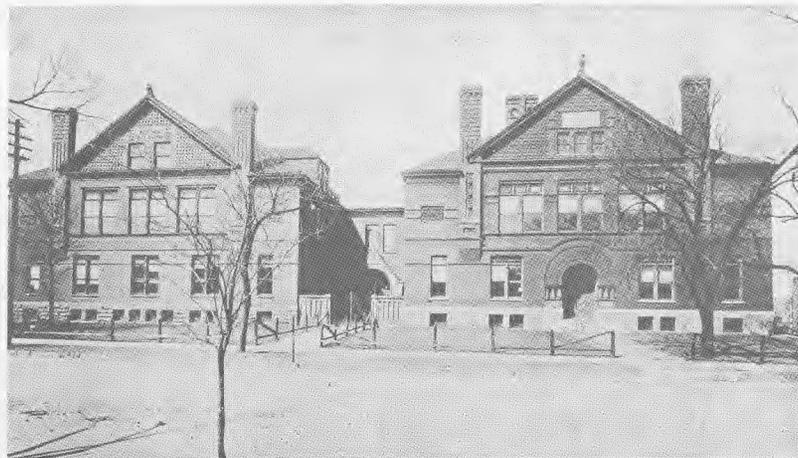
(To be concluded in next issue)

SCHOOLS KEPT APACE  
by W. Ashton Johnson  
(Continued from last issue)

Principal Muth entered the public school system of Rockford in 1919. He was assigned a post at Church School, succeeding Miss Ida M. Patterson who left her post to become the city's first policewoman. The supervisory post at O.F. Barbour School was his next assignment. From 1924 to 1936 he was principal of Roosevelt Junior High, and from '36 to '40 held a similar post at Lincoln Junior High.

With the city's phenomenal growth emphasizing the need for new high schools, a bond issue finally passed by which Auburn High was built on the northwestern edge of the city in 1958-59. John Wyeth, who had served as a coach and assistant principal, was named as the school's first administrative head. In the time that this school has been in session, its faculty has maintained scholarship at a high level and in athletics, its heroes have earned state-wide recognition.

Guilford High School opened its doors in 1962. During the 1962-63 year, enrollment neared capacity and several added physical education features were completed. John Swanson, formerly assistant principal at East, headed the



The First Two High School Buildings on South Madison Street

Guilford faculty during its early years.

As a means of reducing the overhead and balancing the budget, Supt. W. Ray McIntosh recommended the withdrawal of the public school kindergarten program in 1962. Failure of the voters to sanction a school bond program for new grade school buildings was another factor that decided the board action. All available space was urgently needed for lower grade enrollment.

Parents and teachers undertook successfully to enroll families in pay-pre-school programs, and nearly a score of these private projects were in operation when the fall term opened. Most of these were housed in churches or private homes. Kindergartens were re-instated after two years, following a successful referendum.

Rockford's school population expanded from a 10,000 base in 1923 to nearly 38,000 by 1965. The growth may be followed perusing the following enrollment table:

1923-24: 10,015; 1924-25: 11,465; 1929-30: 15,005; 1934-35: 12,218 (Kindergarten classes dropped due to financial shortage); 1944-45: 12,182; 1949-50: 12,934; 1954-55: 19,224 (Westview and Rock River school districts annexed to city); 1959-60: 25,231; 1963-64: 29,350.

In mid-year, 1964, school board members began screening applicants for the McIntosh position. The veteran superintendent was scheduled for retirement in June of 1965 due to reaching mandatory age of sixty-five.

With the 1964-65 year closing there were 32 public

grade schools in operation. Six senior high schools were in the Rockford area, one of them a Catholic diocesan operated school. They were: Rockford East, Rockford West, Auburn, Guilford, Harlem (in nearby Loves Park), and Boylan Central. The Rockford diocese of the Catholic Church also operated St. Mary's, St. James, St. Anthony's, St. Peter's, St. Patrick's, St. Peter and Paul's and St. Stanislaus parochial schools.

Jefferson, Lincoln, Roosevelt, Washington and Wilson Junior High schools served over 7,000 pupils in the 1964-65 school year.

In nearby Loves Park, the Harlem Consolidated school district embodied Harlem Senior High, with approximately 1,500 students; Marshall, Hamilton, and Franklin Junior High Schools, besides the grammar schools. Total enrollment for the 1964-65 year was 7,929.

With the opening of the 1964-65 school year in September, approximately 38,000 young folks were receiving benefit from public schools in the Greater Rockford area. Figures provided by the Rockford Catholic Diocesan office showed that over 7,000 parochial grade school and 1,500 high school students were enrolled in Rockford and Loves Park area. These enrollment figures totaled well over 45,000 as the school population of Greater Rockford.

From the beginning of our public school system, the city has been fortunate in retaining capable administrative officials. Successors to Peleg R. Walker as superintendent of city schools who have become nationally known in the education field include Robinson G. Jones and Selmer Berg. The former introduced the junior high school plan in Rockford, while the latter expanded the curriculum that gave our high schools the highest college accredited rating.

Rockford's retired superintendent, W. R. McIntosh, held his office through a decade that resulted in the city's greatest population increase. Inclusion of several new school districts and construction of two high schools were evidence of progress during the period between 1952 and 1964.

(Editor's note: This article was written by W. Ashton Johnson, first editor of NUGGETS OF HISTORY who passed away in late 1964. Failure to include more recent developments in the Rockford schools is due to the fact that the article was written so many years ago. This was a chapter of a book about Rockford's history which Mr. Johnson had hoped to publish. Through the kindness of his widow, Mrs. Mabel Johnson, we are occasionally printing chapters of the book as articles in NUGGETS OF HISTORY.)

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