

“Meeker Mission Thrived on Pioneer Perseverance  
From Franklin’s Past, Part III”  
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The Rev. Jotham Meeker’s journal entry for June 18, 1837, reads in part: “...Arrive at Ottawa. Unload the wagons and carry our all into a small rough cabin intended for a stable, without chimney, floor or window.”

The exact location of their first home, and where they established the Ottawa Baptist Mission, has not been determined yet. It’s known, however, that it was on the north bank of the Marais des Cygnes River and about two or three miles east of Ottawa, or near the Fort Scott Crossing.

The Meekers’ initial rude hut soon was enlarged by a second small cabin. These two humble structures, with an enclosed wood shed linking them together, were what the Meekers called “home” for the next four years. “Making do” with this temporary shelter, they took up their mission work in earnest.

In the following years, the Meekers’ small farm and its number of outbuildings slowly grew, including the addition of a schoolhouse for the Indian children. Their large “mission house” finally was erected in 1841. Built of logs, the nearly 20-by-40 foot structure was 1½ stories tall, had four rooms, two fireplaces, glass windows and a cellar. An attached kitchen completed the Meekers’ new home.

Just three years later, however, disaster struck the mission. The Great Flood of 1844 washed away nearly everything the Meekers owned, with the water apparently cresting seven feet above the 1951 flood level.

Eleanor Meeker, sitting on a rocky bluff above the swollen Marais des Cygnes, wrote a detailed description of the loss of her home. After fleeing by canoe to a nearby hill, the Meekers and their daughters watched as one thing after another was swept away from the mission.

“Our stable, chicken house, bee house, corncrib, kitchen, smokehouse, garden fences, peach orchard, apple trees, cornfield, and every stick and board swept off clean,” Mrs. Meeker wrote. Trying to rescue some belongings, the Rev. Meeker nearly was killed when the kitchen broke up in the torrent.

The Ottawas also had to flee to the hills, with most of their homes and crops being destroyed. The Rev. Meeker’s urgent requests for aid from fellow Baptists helped prevent the tribe from starving that winter.

In the spring of 1845, the Ottawa Baptist Mission was moved to higher ground two miles north. The location that was selected was a picturesque hill above Ottawa Creek and is the site of a current archeological dig.

The mission house, which had survived the flood, was rebuilt on the new site, and new outbuildings were constructed. The following year a log meeting house was erected nearby, “just beyond our garden.” When members of the Indian congregation died they were buried in the churchyard, thereby creating the Ottawa Mission Cemetery.

Split rail fences zig-zagged across the mission grounds, keeping the livestock out of the house, church, crops and haystacks. A paling fence kept smaller animals out of the garden.

The printing press Meeker had used at Shawnee was moved to the site in 1849 and was put to use in the office building.

Convenient water was a problem at the second mission. Meeker had three or four wells dug and re-dug at a considerable expense, but with little result. Most of their water was carried from the creek, which also served as a baptismal.

The California Gold Rush of 1849 affected the Meekers, because a branch California trail from Missouri passed in front of the mission. For several years, hundreds of wagons and thousands of cattle passed by every spring. One of the many unmarked graves in the cemetery is that of a white child who died en route to California.

After the deaths of the Rev. and Mrs. Meeker in 1855 and 1856, the mission house was used briefly by two other Baptist missionaries, then allowed to fall into ruins. By 1864, domestic animals were living in the house. Its windows and doors were gone and its flowers and shrubbery trodden. The church was used and maintained until Tauny Jones moved the congregation into the new town of Ottawa, then it, too, was torn down.

Today, an excavation of the site is uncovering relics of the historic Ottawa mission, including fragments of what is probably Eleanor Meeker's china and also type from the first printing press in Kansas.