

“Today Significant in Local History”  
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One hundred and fifty years ago today, two mud-caked wagons slowly churned to a halt along the banks of the Marais des Cygnes River.

Alighting from the wagons were a young Baptist missionary, his wife, infant daughter and two Indian children who served as household help.

That evening the missionary wrote in his journal: “...Arrive at Ottawa. Unload the wagons and carry our all into a small rough cabin intended for a stable, without chimney, floor or window, it being the only house we have as yet had put up.”

This event may not sound like anything especially noteworthy. Yet, it is well worth commemorating, for the Rev. Jotham and Eleanor Meeker are believed to have been the first permanent white settlers in what is now Franklin County.

It can be argued that when the muddy wheels of their wagons rolled to a stop on June 18, 1837, the history of current-day Franklin County began.

Try to imagine what this area was like at the time—18 years before the county was organized and nearly a quarter of a century before Kansas obtained statehood.

It was simply a wilderness. Vast stretches of fertile, rolling prairie were thickly blanketed with tall native grasses and wildflowers. Narrow, dark green bands of dense woods zigzagged their way along the principal streams, adding more color and texture to the landscape.

Beneath the great arms of the oak, walnut, hickory, cottonwood and other trees were tangles of wild grapes, sumac, various berries and hundreds of other native plants.

The woods and prairies teemed with numerous species of birds, reptiles and animals, co-existing in a delicate balance with each other.

The Meeker’s must have found it a beautiful, yet harshly primitive and only, place to live. Floods, droughts blizzards and prairie fires also could make it deadly.

Several hundred Indians were thinly scattered in huts along the creeks. However, unlike the animals and flowers, the Indians, for the most part, were not native. They belonged to several tribes which had been pushed from their homes farther east by the federal government, and removed to Kansas.

The Meekers saw it as their mission to aid these displaced Indians, especially the Ottawas. The missionary couple attended to the tribe’s physical, spiritual and educational needs and tried to prepare them for the encroaching domination of the white man’s rules and culture. They also tried to protect them from the unscrupulous.

For the rest of their lives, the remarkable Meekers persevered to those ends, despite great challenges, and jointly served the Ottawas as minister, teacher, doctor and friend.

Besides establishing the first permanent white settlement, the Meekers’ efforts on behalf of the Ottawas include several “firsts” for Franklin County: The first church, the first school and the first printing press.

Mrs. Meeker’s birth of a baby girl in 1839 also probably was the first white child born here.

The Meekers were not, however, the first whites to visit the region. Records show that explorers, trappers, traders, surveyors, government agents and itinerant missionaries all visited present-day Franklin County at earlier dates.

But no evidence has come to light documenting a permanent settlement by anyone other than the Meekers besides the Indians.

The exact location of this historic site has not been positively established, but various descriptions place it as being on the north bank of the Marais des Cygnes about three miles straight east of Ottawa.

More exactly, the mission probably stood about six-tenths of a mile east of the new Fort Scott Crossing bridge, where the present road forks into a “Y.” There, at the foot of the small rocky bluff, the “first family” of Franklin County probably established its home—150 years ago today.

The great flood of 1844 largely destroyed the mission on this site and the Meekers moved to higher ground two miles north on Ottawa Creek where the Ottawa Mission Cemetery is located. There the Rev. Jotham and Eleanor remained until their deaths, and there they were buried.