History of Mitchellville

1842 – The United States signed a treaty with the Sac and Fox Indians in western Iowa.

1843 – U.S. Army troops arrived at the forks of the Raccoon and Des Moines River to establish Fort Des Moines. The troops were stationed to keep peace in the area, keep white traders from taking advantage of the Indians, and to protect the Sauk and Meskwaki Indians from longtime rivals, the Sioux.

1844 – Thomas Mitchell got permission to build a stage station and inn to be used as a stopping place for supply wagons traveling to Fort Des Moines, at the crossing of Camp Creek (current day Thomas Mitchell Park). In return, Mitchell built a bridge across Camp Creek. Henry Mitchell, Thomas’s younger brother came to the area and built a double log cabin for Thomas and his family.

April 1845 – Thomas Mitchell arrived with his wife; Orrin, his 22 month old son; two month old daughter, Ann; a hired girl and a hired man. Thomas and his brother Henry were partners in the business, Thomas ran the stage station and inn, and Henry brought supplies from the east.

1845 – The area was officially opened to settlers. Federal law had prohibited white settlers in the territory until the land had been surveyed and was ready to sell.

January 1846 – Iowa Legislature recognized Polk County and named it for the U.S. President, James Knox Polk. Thomas Mitchell and several other settlers helped organize the county, Mitchell was part of the group that lobbied to make Fort Des Moines the county seat, it was a controversial decision.

February 1846 – The troops stationed at Fort Des Moines were moved to Jefferson Barracks near St. Louis. The abandoned building of the fort became the core of the town of Des Moines.

April 1846 – Thomas Mitchell’s Apple Grove Inn was one of three polling place for the first county election of officers. Voters rode in to cast their ballots in “Uncle Tommy’s hat”. Mitchell was elected as the first sheriff of Polk County.

Mitchell and his family were known for “pioneer neighborliness”. It was often said the latch string on his door was always out, and his heart “was as open as his cabin door.”

Mitchell was also a friend to the Indians and frequently visited their villages and conversed in their languages. He knew Black Hawk, Appanoose, and Poweshiek personally.

Mitchell was active in county politics and had strong convictions, including advocating for freedom for negroes. During the Civil War, his home was a stop on the Underground Railroad.

January 1852 – Harris Over Land Guide for travelers heading west contained this advertisement “Tom Mitchell (!!!) Dispenses comfort to the weary (!) feeds the hungry (!) and cheers the gloomy (!!!) at his old, well-known stand, 13 miles east of Ft. Des Moines. Don’t pass me by.”

1852 – Mitchell helped organize the first Polk County Fair in Des Moines, and served as one of three of the directors of the Fair, he also showed stock.

1853 – Mitchell was a representative that helped organize the first State Agricultural Society. That same year the Mississippi and Missouri Railroad surveyed the area to establish a route for the railroad and sites for depots.

1854 – Mitchell sold his Apple Grove Inn and built a 22 room house several miles north on the proposed route for the new railroad. Even though he was no longer an innkeeper, many travelers still stopped and stayed with his family. The house was located near what is now the on ramp to I-80 west bound.

1856 – Mitchell, Milton Ferguson, and Wilson Jones laid out an 80 acre plot in Section 2 of Beaver Township, now just south of the I-80 rest area. Originally called Mitchellville, after the second Mitchellville was built, the first was called Mitchell Town. In the Fall of 1856 the David Matter family became the first residents of Mitchell Town. Mitchell had invited Matter to move there and become the town’s first blacksmith. Matten, his wife and nine children came by covered wagon from Pennsylvania, taking turns walking and riding on the journey. Camp Creek ran from north to south through the town. The stage coach route from Iowa City and Newton to Des Moines stopped there. Instead of log cabins, small frame houses were built. With a team of farm horse, it took four hours to from Mitchell Town to Des Moines.

The first general store was opened in 1857 by William Sweeney. Mitchell and three other men built a hotel called the Mitchell House with a barn for stage coach horses attached. Mitchell did not run the hotel, but helped start other businesses including a steam saw mill in Trullinger’s Grove, co-owned by R.B. Ellis.

The 1859 Colorado gold rush brought up to 50 wagons a day coming through to mine gold in Colorado. The schoolhouse was the center of the community, it was the school, Church, Sunday School, and hosted many heated political debates about the question of slavery. In 1860 Mitchell helped organize the Universalist Church which held services in the school house every fourth Sunday.

1861 – Mitchell Town had a population of 200. The Civil War began and the Mitchellville Brass Band was organized and played at political rallies in the area. James Craig was the leader of the band.

The Civil War raged from 1861-1865, Mitchell Town and Polk County sent approximately 50 men to join the Union Army, most served with the Tenth Iowa Regiment. The war also prevented the plans of the Mississippi and Missouri Railroad to come to Iowa.

1867 – Rock Island Railroad bought the Mississippi and Missouri Railroad and decided to lay tracks south of Mitchell Town. Thomas Mitchell and his wife bought 160 acres near the railroad and sold the lots for $20 with the promise that no liquor be sold on the premises. Over the next four years the town of Mitchellville sprung up and buildings and businesses were moved from Mitchell Town to Mitchellville. Mitchell Town had been a frontier town with Indians walking through, stage coaches stopping, and soldiers passing through. Mitchellville was a modern, civilized, settled town.

Thomas Mitchell donated the land for the Universalist Church, a city park, and a cemetery, all still part of present day Mitchellville.

February 1868 – the Early Settlers Association was organized with Thomas Mitchell elected the first President. Members had to be living in the area since 1856 or earlier. There were 400 settlers present for the first festival.

1872 – Thomas Mitchell donated the land to build a Universalist Seminary to be an Academy that offered college preparatory classes and Business training.

1874 and 1876 – Mitchell was elected to the Iowa State Senate and served on a variety of committees.

1880 – The Universalist Seminary was deep in debt and sold to the State of Iowa to be a reform school for girls. Eventually the school became the Women’s Correctional Institute.

July 15, 1894 – Thomas Mitchell passed away at age 78. So many people wanted to attend his funeral that a special train came from Des Moines to Mitchellville for the service. Over 1,000 people were present at the Universalist Church, many had to stay outside on the lawn. After the service, the casket was placed outside under the trees for viewing before he was taken to the cemetery for burial.

Thomas Mitchell did not want to write about his part in developing Polk County, he said he didn’t want anyone to think he was boasting.