

EARLY INDIANAPOLIS.

THE FLETCHER PAPERS.

[In 1879 there was published in *The Indianapolis News* a series of articles by the Rev. J. C. Fletcher on Early Days in Indianapolis. These papers, some twenty-five in number, were printed at intervals from March to September, making, in the aggregate, an amount of matter wholly beyond the limits of the space to be spared in this magazine. Much of this matter was second-hand, and a repetition of facts that had already been published in the city histories. On the other hand, not a little of it was based upon two documents of antiquarian value, which are to the present day kept in private possession as being, in the main, of family interest only. These are the journals of Mr. Calvin Fletcher, the elder, and his wife, which record happenings in the new capital at a very early day. These journals, where quoted directly or where drawn upon, afford glimpses of life, society, conditions and events that are wholly fresh and a distinct contribution to the source material of Indianapolis history. Such matter as has, in my judgment, this distinct value, I have selected from the series, making free with the text in the matter of abridgement. The student who may wish to make use of the full text, may do so by aid of the references given. The full series may be found in issues of the above paper for March 10, 15, 22, 29; April 4, 12, 19, 26; May 10, 17, 24; June 7, 14, 21, 28; July 5, 12, 19, 26; August 2, 9, 16, 25; September 10, 19. The portions selected will probably run throughout this year.—*Editor.*]

First Religious Items—First Sale of Lots—First Frame House—First Private Libraries—The "Collins Axe"—Judge McIlvaine's Cotton Crop—Pioneer Industry—Tallow and Culture—Social Life—Christmas Party and Barrel of Cider—New Year's Ball, the First Great Social Event.

From the News of March 10, 1879.

IN perusing, recently, a brief diary kept by my mother (who died in 1854) I found several interesting religious facts and data in connection with the history of Indianapolis.

My father was married to Sarah Hill, in Urbana, O., May 1, 1821. He made a preliminary visit to Indianapolis in August of that year. On September 19, accompanied by my mother, he began his second journey to Indianapolis, arriving here in nine days. On the first day of October he rented a log cabin on block 70, lot No. 2. In my father's journal, date of Dec. 31, 1821, I find this entry:

"I am now situated on block 70, lot No. 2, in a little cabin, 16 x 17 feet, belonging to a Mr. Cap, of Cincinnati."

It was here that my mother began the brief diary referred to. The persons most frequently mentioned in the diary are Mr. James Blake, Mr. and Mrs. Paxton, Dr. Coe, Mr. and Mrs. Nowland, Mrs. Bates, the Hawkins's, B. F. Morris, Dr. Dunlap, the Bradleys, the Yandes's, and Judge and Mrs. Wick.

These are the religious data I have spoken of:

"Sunday, Nov. 18, 1821. I attended prayer-meeting at Mr. Stevens'.

"Sunday, Nov. 25. I attended preaching at Mr. Hawkins', where I heard a very good sermon by a Newlight minister. The text was: 'See that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil.'

"Sunday, Dec. 30. I heard a sermon delivered by a Newlight minister which I did not think commendable, but we must allow for it, as it has not been but about three months since he began to speak in public.

"Sunday, May 12, 1822. I attended preaching in the Governor's Circle. It was the first sermon ever delivered at that place. Rev. Mr. Proctor took his text from the 30th chapter of Proverbs, and 17th verse: 'Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace.' In the afternoon he delivered another sermon from Luke XV:7: 'I say unto you that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner who repenteth.' The preacher is a Presbyterian and a very good orator.

"Tuesday, 14th. In the morning it rained and in the afternoon it was clear but muddy. Mr. Fletcher attended preaching at the schoolhouse. The sermon was delivered by Mr. Proctor, who took for his text Ps. 42, 1st verse: 'As the hart panteth after the water brook, so panteth my soul after thee, O God!'

"Monday, the 20th of May. Rainy and disagreeable. Rev. Mr. Proctor, Dr. Coe, Mr. Linton, Mr. Fletcher and myself all dined at Mr. Nowland's.

"Tuesday, 21st. I rode (horseback) out in the country about two miles to Mr. Burton's with Mr. Paxton and Mrs. Nowland.

May 28th. This day we moved into Mr. Blake's house* and took possession for one year.

*On Washington street west of Illinois.

“Friday, 31st. This day Mr. Fletcher started on the circuit.* We arose early in the morning. It was quite pleasing to hear the birds. How cheerfully they sung! Their notes were so mingled that a person could not distinguish one bird from another. This day Mr. Rice, a Presbyterian preacher, and Dr. Coe dined with Mr. Blake and myself.

“Sunday, 9th June. Mrs. Wick and I attended Methodist preaching.

“Sunday, 16th June. In the morning Mr. Blake went to Sabbath school.†

“Sunday, 12th July. This day attended Baptist preaching at the schoolhouse. * * * Camp meeting commenced the 13th day of September and held four days.‡

“Sunday, April 15th, 1823. Our school commenced, which, I hope, will be of great benefit to the children of our town.”§

I find three funerals recorded in my mother’s journal, as follows:

“Sunday, March 24, 1822. Attended a funeral and a burial.|| I did not see a single tear shed in the whole assemblage, except by Mrs. Nowland, when she showed me where her child was buried.

“Sunday, 12th of July, 1822. This day Mr. Jones departed this life, about 8 o’clock in the morning. * * * He is to be buried this afternoon.

“Monday, November 11, (’22). About two o’clock p. m. Mr. Nowland departed this life, and, it was said, very happily. He said he ‘had made his peace with God, and was willing to go.’

“Tuesday, November 12. Rev. Mr. Proctor delivered a very pathetic sermon on the occasion [of Mr. Nowland’s burial]. His text was: ‘It is better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting.’”

*Under the old constitution, the president circuit judge held courts over an extensive territory, and it was a custom of the lawyers to travel with him throughout the judicial circuit.—*Editor*.

†The first mention of a Sabbath school in Indianapolis.—*J. C. F.*

‡Was not this the first camp meeting held in Marion county?—*J. C. F.*

§This doubtless refers to the re-commencing of the Sunday-school begun June 26, 1822.—*J. C. F.*

||Who the person buried was I have no means of knowing.—*J. C. F.*

From the News of April 4.

On the 8th of October, 1821, Indianapolis was to have her first great gathering. It was on that day that the sale of lots of the newly laid out capital took place. Carter's and Hawkins' tavern, Nowland's and other boarding houses were crowded. In her journal Mrs. Calvin Fletcher wrote:

"October 8, 1821. The sale of lots commenced near our house. A large concourse of people were present."

This could not have been far from Washington and Missouri streets, as block 70, lot 2, is west of Missouri, on the south side of Washington. The sale, as my father once informed me, began upon a day that was overcast and gloomy. The wind was high, and while the auctioneer was urging the bidding a limb was wrenched from its place in the trees overhead, and one of the bystanders came near being killed. The sales continued for a week, and no less than 313 lots were disposed of. The total which these slices of Indianapolis amounted to was \$35,596.25, but the cash payment received at the time by the agent was only 20 per cent., the remaining four-fifths to be paid in four annual instalments. The average price of lots was about \$113. The highest priced one was that on the northwest corner of Washington and Delaware streets, which brought \$500. It is probable that the price paid was owing to the fact that the court house was to be built on the opposite square and it would be valuable as a tavern or dram shop site.*

In his journal, date of October 1, 1821, my father says: "I found the place very sickly," but it appears that after the week of the sale everything put on a better face. My mother speaks of the beauty of the Indian summer. Much of the bright foliage, however, was not to be stripped by the blasts, for the woods were resounding with the stroke of the ax and the crash of falling trees.

The favorite ax of those days was the "Collins ax," manufactured at Hartford, Conn. It seemed to me very strange in after years to find in the great valley of the Amazon that there was one American manufacture which Sheffield and Birmingham could not drive out. The Indian of the Amazon cleaves his way through matted jungles with a "machete" made by Collins & Co.,

*Ignatius Brown says \$560 for this lot. The site has been for years and is now occupied by a saloon.—*Editor.*

while the knife and hatchet, and the instrument with which he grubs up the ipecacuanha, are all manufactured by the same house which, more than a half-century ago, furnished the axes that chopped down the trees in the streets of Indianapolis.

Cabins arose as if by magic, and one man, Colonel Paxton, had the audacity to begin a frame house on the south side of Washington street (near Illinois). This building, before it was finished, was sold to Mr. James Blake. My father and mother were to be the first occupants, and here my brothers, Elijah and Miles, and myself were born. The main body of this magnificent residence was one story high, and consisted of two rooms, neither of which could have been more than fifteen feet square, connected by a covered space with a kitchen. My mother in her journal speaks of moving from their smoky cabin to this frame house in May, 1822, while my father has left in his diary a copy of the agreement by which he rented the house from Mr. Blake. As it illustrates the prices of board and rent at that day I copy the contract. It sets forth that:

“The said Blake covenants and agrees to give to the said Fletcher possession of the frame house standing on block 67, lot 12, as soon as it shall be fixed convenient for a family to dwell therein, together with the said lot, which the said Fletcher is to have and enjoy for the term of one year from and after the time he takes possession. In consideration of the above premises he, the said Fletcher, is to board the said Blake during the year, * * * and the said Blake is to give the said Fletcher ten bushels of corn as a further consideration of board; and the said Blake is to have the privilege of the east room of said house in common with said Fletcher, together with the stable and said lot.”

Colonel Blake was the first in Indianapolis to have a non-professional collection of miscellaneous works that might be called a library. My father and Mr. Merrill were next in the list with literary works, Mr. Merrill's collection being the larger. Goldsmith's "Animated Nature" and the "Arabian Nights' Entertainments" were the first books, except the Bible, read to me by my mother, that made an impression upon me.

From the News of April 12.

In October, 1821, there were three weeks of beautiful weather, and my mother says in her journal, under the date of October 27:

“This day is very pleasant and rather smoky. It appears like Indian summer. We have had very little rain in this place for about three weeks. This has made it very favorable for those who have moved in and are building.”

Under such circumstances Indianapolis may be said to have begun her existence. The sale of more than three hundred lots, but few of which were purchased on speculation, brought hither those who were to be permanent settlers. There seemed to be a most kindly disposition on the part of the people toward each other. Visits were the order of the day and mutual aid was never withheld. There was not a capitalist in Indianapolis—but few were even with the world—and there was not a man or woman, however exalted their social position in the land whence they came, but put his or her hand to work in the frontier life of the New Purchase. In her journal I find my mother writing on the 1st day of November, as follows.

“This day I was spinning wool at Mr. McIlvain’s.”

This Mr. McIlvain was the earliest justice of the peace in Indianapolis. He was an upright, Christian man, who had been associate justice in Ohio and was afterward elected one of the associate judges for Marion county. His log cabin stood not far from the present site of the Second Presbyterian Church. One of my earliest recollections is that of a visit to Judge McIlvain’s. He cultivated the ground that is around the church, and produced the usual crop of corn and potatoes. He also was the first to raise poultry on an extended scale. There was one crop that was unusual, and which, I presume, he was the first and the last to raise in Indianapolis. My father informed me that when he first came here, in the summer of 1821, he found Judge James McIlvain living at the place I have indicated, and that, amongst other things he had planted, was quite a large patch of cotton. This cotton came to maturity in the autumn, and served the purpose, when spun, of candle wicking.

I spoke of the alacrity with which new Indianapolitans aided each other and turned their hands to everything. I give a few instances, quoting from my mother’s journal:

“November 5, 1821. Mr. Fletcher has been helping Mr. Blake husk corn.” Again: “Friday, December 7. We killed a beef. Mr. Paxton and Mr. Blake helped to butcher it.” Again, under the date of November 24: “Mrs. Nowland was making a

bonnet. She came to me to know whether I could make it. I did not understand it, but gave her all the instruction I possibly could." Other entries are: "I was very much engaged in trying out my tallow;" "To-day I dipped candles;" "To-day I finished the 'Vicar of Wakefield';" and, "I commenced to read the Life of Washington." There was also an inkling of a singing-school in "I borrowed of Mr. Blake a singing book." There are afterwards notices of the singing-school, where all that could sing joined for mutual improvement. One of the leading singers was Henry Bradley, who was one of the early pillars of the Baptist church in Indianapolis.

The reference in this journal to dinner parties, teas, quiltings, etc., are exceedingly numerous. Good feeling pervaded the whole community. While there was genuine western hospitality, there were some other motives at the bottom for such constant courtesy on the part of many of the new-comers toward the rank and file. There was to be an election of county officers in the spring and hence the endeavor on the side of certain gentlemen to win over by politeness and attention every voter and his wife.

The first mention of any musical instrument in the journal is in an entry of December 27, 1821:

"I was sitting by the fire and Mr. Fletcher was reading Robertson's history of America when the news came that Mr. Blake had returned from Corydon. Mr. F. has gone to see him, and when I write a few more lines I will go also, although I feel very much fatigued, for it is a long time since I have heard the fiddle played. I think it will seem very melodious, and I am just about to start to hear it."

But while there were plenty of calls, visits, etc., the great social events of the winter were the Christmas and New Year's parties. The former was a "stag" party, and the latter was a ball. My father's journal is more full in regard to Christmas, 1821:

"This day I got up at sunrise. I visited several of my neighbors, who all appeared friendly. About ten o'clock I went to the river" [on the banks of which there were then more cabins than elsewhere]. "I found at Mr. McGeorge's a large collection of men, principally the candidates for the new county offices. The

county is just being laid off. McGeorge had the only barrel of cider in town. I suppose it to have cost him about seven dollars. In the liberality of the candidates the barrel was unheaded, and all promiscuously drank. But as the cider was frozen, the dog-irons were put red-hot into the barrel. After having drunk heartily of the cider they took brandy, which soon produced intoxication. A friend of mine, having in some way made a mistake as to its inebriating qualities, took too much. I therefore left the company and came home with him. I found a great degree of accommodation and courtesy used among all classes. The candidates led the concourse from one place to another till sundown."

The ladies on that Christmas appeared to have had a very unostentatious time of it, for they spent the day in much quiet visiting.

"Tuesday, Christmas," writes my mother, "Mrs. Bradley and Mrs. Paxton came and spent the day with me. They dined with me. Then Mrs. B. and I went to Mrs. Paxton's, where we both took tea. After remaining a while I returned home, and then went to the Nowland's. I then came home again and read a chapter in the Bible, etc."

The crowning social occasion of the season was a New Year's party given at Mr. Wyant's cabin, of which occasion Colonel Blake was the master, as he was of most public assemblies. I have now before me the invitation to that first party of a ceremonious kind ever given in the New Purchase. This is the first invitation of a formal nature ever penned here. There was no printing press at that time in Indianapolis, and there was evidently but very little writing paper. The paper is four by two and three-quarter inches, and the invitation, written in a clear hand, reads:

"The company of Mr. and Mrs. Fletcher is requested to a party at J. Wyant's, Tuesday, the first day of January, 1822, at 3 o'clock p. m.

Managers, A. W. RUSSELL,
K. A. SCUDDER."

"Indianapolis, December 28, 1821."

We can see how democratic were the hours in those primitive days. This party or ball began at three p. m. and concluded at midnight.

[To be continued.]