

## Colonel John Jackson

By H. S. K. BARTHOLOMEW

The first white man who ever set foot on Elkhart County soil and afterwards become a citizen of the county was Col. John Jackson. He was not the first white man that ever came to what is now Elkhart County. More than a century before his day French explorers and missionaries passed up and down the lordly St. Joseph River, which flows through its northern part, and it has even been claimed that LaSalle made one of his perilous journeys over the same stream. Col. Jackson was not the first white settler in the County, for when he came here to make his permanent home, there were already two small settlements—one on Elkhart Prairie, the other at the junction of the St. Joseph and Elkhart rivers, the site of the present city of Elkhart.

Col. Jackson was born on July 2, 1790, in Hardy County, Virginia, to which place his father, Peter Jackson, had moved from near Philadelphia. The father was a Revolutionary soldier who served under Washington. The family remained in Virginia until 1799, moving then to the Northwest Territory and settling in what four years afterward became the state of Ohio. The place of settlement was near the present city of Chillicothe. The elder Jackson continued to reside there until his death which occurred in 1836 at the age of eighty-five years. At the age of eighty, the old veteran came to Elkhart County to visit his son who had migrated two years before. The aged man made the trip on horseback and returned the same way. One who saw him at that time said years afterwards: "He was then almost unimpaired by age, neat in dress and of gentlemanly appearance; a useful, intelligent and worthy citizen."

In 1811 Col. Jackson was united in marriage with Catharine Carr, a woman of great strength of character and well fitted to share with him the hardships and privations of pioneer life which they were destined to take up less than a score of years later. Not long after the marriage, came the war of 1812, when most of the able-bodied men of the country, of military age, were called upon to serve in the army at one time or another. Along the frontier settlements were hostile Indians who were ready to fight for the British and there

was need for soldiers at all times. John Jackson was one of the first to offer his services and at first was assigned to a regiment which was under the command of Governor R. J. Meigs. Later he served under Gen. Anthony Wayne and for a time was stationed at Fort Wayne. His company was sent farther northwest to what was then called the St. Joseph country in pursuit of the Indians who had disturbed the pioneer settlers along the frontier.

Lieutenant Jackson led his troops as far as Elkhart Prairie, crossing the Elkhart River about a mile below the site of the present village of Benton. A short distance from the crossing they came upon the village of Aubenaubee from which the Indians had fled, leaving their fires with food cooking over them. The soldiers destroyed the village together with about seventy acres of corn on the Prairie. That night Lieutenant Jackson made his camp a half mile east of the village and on the edge of the prairie. Years afterward he told I. N. McCann, one of the County's prominent citizens, that when he awoke the next morning and saw the sun rising over the thick woods east of the prairie it seemed to him the most beautiful sight he ever saw, and that he resolved then and there, that, when these lands should be subject to government entry, he would come and locate on his camping place. He did come in 1825 but found the Prairie and surrounding country still occupied by the Indians. In 1828 he learned that the Indian titles had been extinguished and in the fall of that year he came west again, this time traveling as far as the Cary Mission which was located on or near the site of the present city of Niles, Michigan. He found no spot that was as attractive to him as the one he had selected when a soldier sixteen years before. He returned to his home in Ross County, Ohio, and the following January started with ox teams, wagons and farming implements for the new country which had become in his sight a land of promise. When he arrived he found that the home he had chosen had been taken. Elias Riggs and his son-in-law, William Simpson, had located there and built a cabin in which they were living. Jackson was sorely disappointed and started away to look for another location. He had not gone far until he was overtaken by Riggs, who offered to sell his claim. Terms were agreed upon, Jackson paying fifty dollars and receiving the land of his choice. Riggs and Simpson selected a tract two miles northeast

and in a few years found themselves in possession of a better farm than the one they had given up. When the Fort Wayne road was established in 1833 it was laid out along the border of this farm. For a century that road has been one of the principal highways of Northern Indiana. A public road was later laid out through the Jackson farm but it is, and always has been, one of the less important roads of the County.

In the spring Col. Jackson broke the prairie sod with his oxen and planted it to corn. The method of planting the prairie land was to drop the corn in every third furrow and turn the next furrow slice over it. That was all that was done the first season. No cultivation was needed. Early in the fall, he returned to his old home in Ohio, brought his family and established himself permanently. He at once became a leading citizen and continued so until his death forty-four years afterward.

From the first, when any improvement was desired or any new enterprise was contemplated, the people looked to Jackson to take the initiative. At the time of his coming to the new country, there was no postoffice nearer than Fort Wayne. The first settlers had to go to that village, for such it was then, to have their grain ground. When one of them went to mill he brought back with him any letters that might be in the postoffice for himself or his neighbors. A mail carrier passed through from Fort Wayne to Cary Mission every four weeks. Mr. Jackson proposed to make application to have the mail opened at some place in the settlement. This necessitated the establishment of a postoffice. A meeting of the settlers was called at his cabin and a petition was drawn up asking the postoffice department at Washington to establish a postoffice to be called Elkhart Plain. All who were present signed the petition and it was carried to Fort Wayne to be sent to Washington. Years afterward he described the further proceedings in an article written for the *Goshen Democrat*:

In due time the commission, bond and all necessary blanks came. The bond was to be signed by two sufficient sureties, to be certified as such by the person administering the oath of office. Here was a dilemma that I did not know how to get over. There was but one man here that I was acquainted with from Ohio, that was James Blair. He would sign the bond, but we had no judicial officer to administer the oath and certify that the bondsman was good for the penalty. I did not know what to do. At length William G. Ewing of Fort Wayne, on his way

to South Bend, called on us to stay over night. I had formed some acquaintances with him in passing back and forth from Ohio. I told him the circumstances and he voluntarily offered to sign the bond. The nearest justice of the peace was at White Pigeon, Michigan. I got James Blair's signature, went over and found the Old Squire. He said he had heard of Ewing as a fur trader and supposed he was good. He signed the certificate and administered the oath of office. I sent the papers to Fort Wayne by the mail carrier and shortly afterward he brought me the key and blank forms and I entered upon the duties of postmaster.

The following year, Jackson was appointed by Gov. Ray a justice of the peace, along with two others, James Mather and Arminius C. Penwell. These three constituted the board of justice, a body which performed about the same functions as those which are now performed by the board of county commissioners. This board organized the county, divided it into two townships, appointed election inspectors and arranged for an election to be held for choosing county officers. It also accepted the report of the commissioners who had been appointed by the Legislature to select a site for a county seat. At the first election Jackson was chosen county commissioner along with Edward Downing and George McCollum. The next year, upon petition of a goodly number of citizens, the Legislature appointed a new set of commissioners for the purpose of re-locating the county seat, the first site chosen not being satisfactory to the citizens of the County. The board of commissioners received the report of these "viewers," gave it their approval and officially located the seat of justice, giving it the name of *Goshen*.

The site selected was government land, and, under a law enacted in 1824, was subject to entry for county seat purposes. There was, however, nobody in the little colony who had any money to pay the entry fee. The land sales were to be held at Fort Wayne in August and there was danger that somebody might enter the tract of land which had been selected. Some time before the opening of the sales, Samuel Hanna of Fort Wayne stopped over night at the Jackson home and was told of the dilemma in which the citizens found themselves. He offered to loan the money and the offer was accepted. Col. Jackson gave his personal note and the next morning started on horseback for Fort Wayne where he made the entry which gave the new county its site for a seat of justice.

In 1832 the commissioners began the erection of the county's first court house. This was completed in 1833 and was used for the first time at the opening of the May term of court. In an article written for the *Goshen Democrat* in 1865, Col. Jackson told of the preparations for and the erection of this building:

It became necessary for the commissioners to build a court house and we were at a loss to know how to go about it. We knew of no architect that could draw a plan or no workman that could build it if he had a plan. Making inquiry among the people, at last we were referred to Jacob Studebaker as a good, honest carpenter. We applied to him for advice on the subject and we found that he was a pretty good architect. We told him what size we wished to build and then he drew up a plan which we considered as good as we could get under the circumstances. We made an agreement with him to do the whole wood work agreeably to the plan he suggested and depended on his honesty to do it right. We had determined to build with brick and engaged Henry Davis to make the brick and procure the lime and put them in the building. Then another difficulty arose, what shall we put in the foundation? As there was but one stone or brick mason in the county, Henry White, we consulted him about laying the foundation with nigger-heads. He said he could do nothing with them; that if we undertook to build a brick wall on them they would crush apart and the wall would fall down. We then determined to select the hard burned brick at the bottom of the kiln and put them in the bottom of the wall, the best thing we could do under the circumstances.

When the County was settled, the law required that military companies should be formed and drills held regularly and shortly after the organization of the County an order came for the formation of a regiment of militia. It became necessary to select a colonel for the new regiment. Mark B. Thompson, who also came to the County in 1829, and who lived on the farm adjoining that of Jackson on the west, aspired to the honor, but Jackson was the more popular. Besides he had gained military experience in the War of 1812. Although he did not seek the honor he was easily elected. He held the office until the military laws fell into disuse, when he resigned.

There were few taverns in the early days, and although there was one in the near by village of Benton, Col. Jackson's cabin home sheltered many travelers as they were passing through the new country. He enjoyed the acquaintance of quite a number of prominent men and they in particular sought his home. Both he and his wife were noted for their hospitality and their home was always open to the stranger as well

as to their friends. As both of them were well educated for their day and generation, their home was one of culture and possessed attractions often rare in pioneer settlements.

In 1832 Col. Jackson built the first frame house in Elkhart County. The timbers for the frame-work were obtained from the woods on his farm and were hewn out by hand, as was the general custom. The hewn-timbers were large enough for any barn that is built today. The lumber was hauled from Fort Wayne with ox team and wagon. The house was a story and a half high with a wing. It became a model for the houses of all well-to-do farmers of that day in that section of the County. This home, more than a century old, still stands on the farm which Col. Jackson entered, but it has been twice remodeled, first in 1851 and then in 1925. It was in possession of members of the Jackson family with the title in the Jackson name for ninety-six years. Then it passed into the hands of a Goshen real estate dealer who still owns it. The last member of the Jackson family to own and occupy it was Frank Jackson. A grandson of Col. Jackson, he was one of the county's substantial citizens. He owned and lived in the old home until his death in 1925.

Col. Jackson was a staunch Democrat who early became a leader of his party in his new home. He cared not for office and never was an office seeker, preferring the quiet and peaceful life of the private citizen. However, at the demand of his party, he became a candidate for the Legislature and was twice elected. In that body, as in every other place in which he was chosen to serve, his counsel was sought and heeded by his associates. In that position, as in every other, he gave the best of himself to the service of his constituents. In one of the campaigns in which he was elected his opponent was Thomas G. Harris, a brilliant young attorney and a leader of the Goshen bar. A fluent talker and an affable gentleman, Harris made a thorough canvass of the county. Later he told of an amusing incident of the campaign. He called upon a well-to-do and prominent farmer and presented his case, apparently with favorable effect; but after listening attentively to the appeal, the farmer said: "It's no use, Mr. Harris, Col. Jackson laid the first worm fence on Elkhart Prairie and I am going to vote

for him." Evidently there were many others who had an equal admiration for the Colonel as he was elected by a substantial majority.

It can be easily understood that Jackson appreciated the influence and power of the press. He was among the first to favor the establishment of a paper of his political faith in the new county seat. In 1837 Ebenezer Browne, who had come from Penn Yan, New York, went back to his native town and brought to Goshen a Washington hand printing-press, with the view of starting a paper. Col. Jackson interested himself in the enterprise and became a stockholder. In September of 1837, the *Goshen Democrat* was launched. That periodical soon became one of the most widely circulated papers in Indiana and continued to be published uninterruptedly for nearly a hundred years, being discontinued only last year. During the last fifteen years of his life Col. Jackson was a frequent contributor to the columns of this paper. His articles were of a reminiscent character, and, having a memory richly stored with facts about his experiences, he was able both to instruct and entertain the *Democrat's* large circle of readers. The Colonel was also frequently called upon to address old settlers' meetings, not only in his home county, but in adjoining counties as well. Perhaps the most notable of these gatherings was held in Goshen in 1858, when many prominent men of the county, lawyers, doctors, merchants and farmers were present and at which many addresses were delivered. The address delivered by Jackson was one of the best. Twenty-nine years had elapsed since he had located on Elkhart Prairie, many of them eventful in the history of the new colony, and he had been in close touch with all that was going on. It is a matter of regret that this address was not reported verbatim and published in full, for it would have preserved for succeeding generations much in the first quarter century of the County's history that has been lost.

To the end of his life Col. Jackson retained his interest in everything that was going on, manifesting the same public spirit that he had shown during all of his active years. While many of his contemporaries were satisfied with the old stage-coach that made its daily trips from Goshen to Warsaw, he realized the necessity of a north and south railroad and favored its construction. Although the road was completed only

two years before his death when he was an old man, he willingly paid his share of the subsidy through which it was obtained.

Soon after coming to Elkhart County, Jackson united with the Methodist church and his home was one of the places at which the circuit riders of that day sought and found entertainment. While he was building his new home and before it was completed services were held there several times. He remained a faithful and devoted member of the church of his choice until his death.

Colonel Jackson was a man of genial and kindly disposition who made friends of all with whom he came in contact. No man of his day had a wider circle of staunch supporters. This was a source of great satisfaction to him, particularly after age had compelled him to cease the activities to which he had been accustomed for so many years. He was visited by both old and young and all enjoyed their association with him. In his last years, his hearing became impaired and conversation with him was difficult, but this did not keep his friends away. They were more than willing to suffer the inconvenience thus occasioned in order that they might profit by his counsel.

In every sense of the word Colonel Jackson was a man of achievement. Possessing the qualities of leadership, he was certain to make his influence felt in whatever circle he might move. In Elkhart County's early days, as this sketch of his life has revealed, there was scarcely any activity or enterprise in which he did not participate. In the establishment of a post-office, in the organization of the County, in the selection of the county seat, in the building of the first court house, as well as in many other important movements, he had a prominent part. Elkhart county has been the home of many distinguished men, lawyers, jurists, statesmen, physicians, clergymen and manufacturers, and is justly proud of all of them, but no name deserves a more conspicuous place in her annals than does that of Col. John Jackson.