

Princeton—An Early Frontier Village in the Hoosier Pocket

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When the Pocket, in the southwest corner of Indiana, was organized into counties in 1813, and Warrick and Gibson were set off from Knox County,¹ the whole territory in the angle made by the junction of the Ohio and the Wabash rivers was still largely a wilderness of forests, widely interspersed with grassy prairies and river bottoms. Though its easy access by water had made it one of the first sections settled, it had as yet, besides one or two military garrisons, only a few settlers' cabins. These were set in small clearings along the old Buffalo Trace, where early travelers westward had stopped, and along the Red Bank Road, which, starting at the Ohio River opposite Henderson, Kentucky, led northward to the old fort and town of Vincennes.² These two lines crossed at about the halfway point and here on a slight eminence of gently rolling hills there was already a considerable settlement, Princeton. Being approximately in the center of the new county—about twenty-five miles north of the Ohio River, the same distance south of Vincennes, twelve miles south of White River, and twelve miles east of the Wabash—it was chosen as the county seat. When the town was platted in 1814,³ a section of about two acres was retained by the county as the site of the courthouse. This section was in the northwest angle of the intersection of the main lines of traffic; the State Road running north and south formed its east boundary, now as always called Main Street; its boundary on the south was the old road east and west, first well-named Main Cross Street and later for no discernible reason changed to Broadway; the north boundary was naturally called North Street, now State; and the street on the west side of the square still bears the name then given it,

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¹ *Acts of the Indiana Territory*, 1813, pp. 68-69.

² George R. Wilson, "Early Indiana Trails and Surveys," *Indiana Historical Society Publications* (Indianapolis, 1895-), VI (1919), 364-380, 392-395.

³ Jas. T. Tartt & Co., *History of Gibson County, Indiana* (Edwardsville, Illinois, 1884), 74-75, 157.

that of a gifted and popular young lawyer of the town, David Hart.⁴ These so-called streets were nothing more than wagon tracks, full of holes and stumps of trees, where a horse had difficulty picking its way, and a vehicle was either enveloped in a cloud of yellow dust in the summer or mired down in sticky clay mudholes in the winter.

The young town of Princeton has been abundantly described by early English travelers who came to it in the course of their travels and in some cases remained there for a time. It was on a well-defined line of travel and could hardly have been avoided; besides, the travelers wanted to see the famous "beautiful Wabash Valley." Morris Birkbeck, George Flower, Elias Pym Fordham, William Faux, and Thomas Hulme were all there before 1820 and all wrote about it. Their descriptions do not agree, being colored by their individual purposes and characteristics of temperament.

Birkbeck had emigrated to the United States in 1817, where his friend George Flower, who had gone before, joined him. Together they conceived a project to colonize a large tract of prairie land in Edwards County, Illinois. Birkbeck was a propagandist, determined to bring to the area more English settlers, who would buy land from him and help to build him up as a great landed proprietor and political leader. His account of America⁵ was published in Philadelphia in 1817 and in London the next year and immediately had a wide distribution both in the United States and abroad.

George Flower, younger than Birkbeck though not in his first youth, had left two half-grown sons in England. Like Birkbeck, he had large sums of ready money to invest in the new venture and hoped to influence a great many of his English acquaintances to join him. His book⁶ was not written until years after his experiences took place, when he was an old man, long since retired from the scenes and events described.

⁴ David Hart came to Princeton in 1815 and lived there until his death. He had the reputation of being a fine lawyer and an honest and impartial judge. *Ibid.*, 91. See also, William Faux, *Memorable Days in America* (London, 1823), 223, 226-227, 231, 232.

⁵ Morris Birkbeck, *Notes on a Journey in America*, (Philadelphia, 1817).

⁶ George Flower, *History of the English Settlement in Edwards County, Illinois* (Chicago, 1882).

Fordham's narrative⁷ was not intended for publication at all, but consisted of journals and letters written on the spot to relatives and friends at home. Some member of the family must have thought they were worthy of publication, however, for copies of portions of them, made by another hand and with the names omitted, were found long afterwards; they were first published in 1906. Fordham was a different type altogether. A brilliant and successful young engineer, twenty-nine years old, he was a favorite pupil, it is said, of the famous George Stephenson, "father of English railways." The young man came to America with Birkbeck in 1817, apparently in a pure spirit of adventure and a love of sport, especially of hunting. He found abundant use in the Western Countries for his surveying abilities. Intelligent and fair-minded, anxious to give an impartial report of all he saw, he was not blind to defects but was willing to excuse them.⁸

William Faux, on the other hand, in his journal of an American tour⁹ which took place in 1819, gives evidence of a sharp eye for shortcomings and a sharp tongue for criticizing them. He was acquainted with many English settlers: "Mr. Pittiss, late of the Isle of Wight," and "my Huntingdonshire friends, Mr. and Mrs. John Ingle."¹⁰ He looked up many others, among them Charles Phillips from Somersetshire, William Peck of Chatteris, James Maidlow, a Hampshire farmer and a neighbor of William Cobbett's, George Potts, from Stockport in Cheshire, and Saunders Hornbrook from Devonshire.¹¹ Faux said his object in coming to America was to find out the real condition and prospects of the crowds of immigrants who had already come. A good antidote to Birkbeck, he was often sharply critical and inclined to minimize what had been accomplished.

Thomas Hulme in the summer of 1818 made a journey to the Western Countries which produced a journal. It was published in William Cobbett's book, *A Year's Residence, in*

⁷ Frederic A. Ogg (ed.), *Personal Narrative. . .* by Elias Pym Fordham (Cleveland, 1906).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 29-38.

⁹ Faux, *Memorable Days in America*.

¹⁰ This was probably the Edward Pittiss who according to Faux's "List of Subscribers" bought two copies of Faux's book. The Pittiss family emigrated to America with John Arnold and family. Brant & Fuller, *History of Rush County, Indiana* (Chicago, 1888), 674; Faux, *Memorable Days in America*, xv, 6, 224, 233, 234.

¹¹ Faux, *Memorable Days in America*, 221, 242-243, 246, 247, 243, 252-253; Brant & Fuller, *History of Vanderburgh County, Indiana* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1889), 579, 580, 590-591, 592.

*the United States of America.*¹² Cobbett, well-known writer and political refugee from England who had taken up residence on a farm on Long Island, was not able to go to the Western Countries himself, but he felt that a firsthand description of them ought to be included in his account. He considered Hulme, who first left England for America in 1816 and had traveled over a considerable part of the new country, an impartial and reliable observer.¹³

Of these five author-travelers, Birkbeck and Fordham made the longest stay in Princeton, the first-named from July, 1817, till January, 1819; the second from July, 1817, until about May, 1822, though during that period he was absent for months at a time, either at Albion in Illinois, on business trips to Louisville and Cincinnati, or on exploring and hunting expeditions round about. Flower was in Princeton from July to September, 1817. Faux made several visits there of a week or two at a time. Hulme was in Princeton for only a few days.

Impressions of the town varied considerably. Fordham wrote that when he arrived in 1817 it consisted of "three small brick, four or five frame, and seven or eight log, houses, and about a dozen cabins. . ." situated in the woods. Birkbeck wrote the same year that the town contained about fifty houses.¹⁴ Faux, there two years later, wrote: "The little town just quitted, and at which I paid the extravagant price of two dollars a day for board, has nineteen streets, and about one hundred and five houses, one prison, and one meeting-house, or church, all of wood; one supreme judge, and four other judges; and in the unpeopled county are another quorum of judges, and three generals." Thomas Hulme's judgment was that Princeton was "a pretty considerable place; very good as to buildings. . ."¹⁵

Most of the thirty families who were living in Princeton when the town was platted were still camping out in rude shelters among the trees and the few cabins already built had been placed more or less at random in the woods. Later,

¹² William Cobbett, *A Year's Residence, in the United States of America* (London, 1819).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 442.

¹⁴ Fordham, *Personal Narrative*, 108; Birkbeck, *Notes on a Journey in America*, 170.

¹⁵ Faux, *Memorable Days in America*, 233-234; Cobbett, *A Year's Residence*, 489.

some of them had to be moved because they stood in the newly laid out streets. The log cabin of Samuel P. Hogue,¹⁶ probably the first one built in the area, was found to be in the middle of Main Street, in the first block south of the square. As soon as the town plat was made, lots were sold at auction and buildings of logs, frame, or brick to be used as taverns began to go up around the square. The first courthouse was dedicated June 19, 1815,¹⁷ and business naturally tended to gather around it. Almost all the general stores of the day were licensed to sell liquor which the pioneers demanded and consumed in large quantities. Of the many so-called taverns, only two, Charles Harrington's on the southeast corner of the Main and Broadway intersection, and Basil Brown's, on the site of the present Hotel Emerson on south Hart Street just off the square, were prepared to offer rooms and board to travelers. Of these, Brown's was the social gathering place of the town and countryside. Here the stages changed horses, and the Masonic Lodge met, and political meetings and frequent balls were held.¹⁸ When the contract for the construction of the courthouse was let in 1814, John Fisher was hired to cut the blackberry briars and papaw bushes off the public square,¹⁹ but most of the tall trees were left standing, the last of them until after the third, or present, courthouse was built.

The contract for the first courthouse was let in 1814. Robert M. Evans²⁰ was instructed to keep the cost of the brick for it below \$5.50 per thousand. The bricks were made in the courthouse yard by Jesse Wells and laid by Killion Creek. The walls were to be two and a half bricks thick on the lower story and two bricks thick on the upper; there were to be two chimneys, with fireplaces on each floor; the rooms were to be twelve feet high on the first floor; and the total height of the building was to be forty feet. Samuel P. Hogue put on the roof and supplied the lumber for the windows which Samuel Boicourt was to glaze and paint. The necessary

¹⁶ Samuel P. Hogue, a carpenter who assisted in building the first courthouse and was one of the early county treasurers, came to Gibson County with the Woods family in 1807. Tartt, *History of Gibson County, Indiana*, 158.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 159.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 157.

²⁰ Evans was born in Virginia in 1783. In 1805 he came to Indiana Territory and settled near Princeton. He founded Evansville, and he died there in 1844. *Ibid.*, 53-54, 155.

"spriggs" and panes of glass were bought from Jones and Stockwell.²¹ Boicourt also did the interior painting. The citizens of the county were not too much upset by the damage to their temporary courthouse, the house of William Harrington²² where court was being held, when it was unroofed by the tornado of 1814, for their permanent "meeting house" was under construction at the time and was ready for occupancy in June, 1815. The first meeting of the court in its new quarters was a very important event, and large crowds of the settlers came to witness the dedication of the building. Willis C. Osbourne and Jesse Emerson presided. Fifteen dollars was paid to Judge Harrington for the use of his house as the courthouse from 1813 to 1815.²³

The town may not have looked exactly civilized to the European travelers of the day, but it had the advantage of harboring only a few Indians in its outskirts, though numbers of them still lingered around Vincennes. The Indians in Gibson County had disappeared with the buffalo, which had not returned after the terrible winter of 1792. No longer was it necessary to patrol the road to the east "as far as the Poke Patch," as General John Gibson²⁴ had ordered William Hargrove²⁵ to do. A few Delaware Indians had a camp on the eastern border of the county near Petersburg; near the Severns rock quarry there were a few Shawnee with whom John Severns²⁶ lived on very friendly terms; a few Miami

²¹ Jones and Stockwell was Princeton's largest general store. See Leonora P. Miller, "Early English Shoppers in Princeton," *Indiana Magazine of History* (Bloomington, 1905-), XLVIII (1952), 289-310.

²² William Harrington, a native of North Carolina, came to Indiana Territory in 1807. Prominent in civic affairs during the early history of Gibson County, he was one of its first judges. *Ibid.*, 55-56.

²³ *Ibid.*, 71, 75, 76, 87.

²⁴ John Gibson, frontier soldier, was born in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, May 23, 1740. Appointed secretary of the Indiana Territory by Thomas Jefferson in 1800, Gibson held that office until 1816. He died in 1822. Thomas D. McCormick, "John Gibson," *Dictionary of American Biography* (20 vols., New York, 1943), VII, 253-254.

²⁵ William Hargrove, a South Carolinian, born in 1775, at an early age went to Kentucky. In 1803 with his family he set out for Missouri, but on reaching Gibson County decided to settle there. He was captain of a company of rangers who fought bravely at the Battle of Tippecanoe. Tartt, *History of Gibson County, Indiana*, 51.

²⁶ John Severns, a native of Wales, came to America before the Revolutionary War and located in Virginia. Captured by Indians, after seven years as their prisoner he escaped to Pennsylvania. After living also in Maryland and Kentucky he penetrated the wilderness of the Northwest Territory in the last decade of the eighteenth century and settled in Gibson County. *Ibid.*, 48-49.

lived on the south bank of the Patoka River near the village. But the only large encampment anywhere near Princeton was across the Wabash on its tributary, Bonpas Creek, that of the Piankashaw, who sometimes wandered across to the Pocket.

Another feature that commended the town to the pioneers was its elevation, 501 feet above sea level, 90 feet above the Wabash, and 115 feet above the Ohio. The settlers had early discovered that hilltops were more salubrious as dwelling places than river bottoms, the fevers and agues of the fall and summer being worse in the lowlands. Besides, the remoteness from rivers was considered a moral advantage because river towns were looked upon as dangerously profligate. Morris Birkbeck observed: "There are about two thousand people employed as boatmen on the Ohio, and they are proverbially ferocious and abandoned in their habits. . . . People who settle along the line of this grand navigation, possess or acquire similar habits, and thus profligacy of manners seems inseparable from the population on the banks of these great rivers. It is remarked indeed every where, that inland navigators are worse than sailors." On the other hand, he wrote that though Princeton was at the furthest limits of Indiana, still it afforded respectable society—"as many well-informed, genteel people, in proportion to the number of inhabitants, as any county town that I am acquainted with. . . . and not one decidedly vicious character, nor one that is not able and willing to maintain himself."²⁷

Furthermore, though the region around Princeton was wooded, the timber was not so dense and impenetrable as elsewhere. It is difficult today to realize what it meant to live in the gloom of the ever-present forests, or to struggle on day after day through the dark miles of awesome, never-ending woods, and what an overwhelming, almost impossible task it seemed to clear them. The travelers of that day attest how terribly the formidable forests oppressed their spirits and with what elation they emerged from them and beheld the open sky. "I shrank," wrote George Flower, "from the idea of settling in the midst of a wood of heavy timber, to hack and hew my way to a little farm, ever bounded by a

²⁷ Birkbeck, *Notes on a Journey in America*, 102-103, 101, 170-171.

wall of gloomy forest.”²⁸ Birkbeck enlarged on the same complaint, writing that the view of the Ohio River at Mt. Vernon, Indiana, “was like the opening of bright day upon the gloom of night, to us who had been so long buried in deep forests. It is a feeling of confinement which begins to damp the spirits, by this complete exclusion of distant objects. To travel, day after day, among trees of a hundred feet high, without a glimpse of the surrounding country, is oppressive to a degree which those cannot [sic] conceive who have not experienced it; and it must depress the spirits of the solitary settler to pass years in this state. His visible horizon extends no farther than the tops of the trees which bound his plantation, perhaps five hundred yards. Upwards he sees the sun, and sky, and stars; but, around him, an eternal forest, from which he can never hope to emerge.” Birkbeck dreams of the day when “America shall have cleared away her forests, and opened her uplands to the breezes. . . .”²⁹

Fordham wrote much the same. “America, however, is not the land of prospects. There is too much wood; and, when on the barren peak of some rocky hill, you catch a distant view, it generally is nothing but an undulating surface of impenetrable forests. . . . It is seldom that a view of 200 yards in extent, can be caught in Indiana. The woods west of the Mountains are not, as Mrs. W. says in the *wrongs* of woman, ‘clustering forests of small trees.’ It is a long time before an English eye becomes accustomed to their size and grandeur.” “When the forests recede from the valleys, and verdure clothes the hills, and villages are scattered through wastes, North America will become a beautiful and picturesque country.”³⁰

The author considers herself fortunate to have seen a tract of Indiana’s primeval forest before the axe had touched it. Fifty years ago there was still standing in Dubois County a forty-acre tract of such forest, mostly white oaks. The firm of lumbermen, A. B. Nickey and Sons, who had bought it, insisted that we come over and see the big trees before they were cut down—“We expect to have the whole piece in corn next year,” they said. So my father got permission from the Southern Railroad to ride to Huntingburg on their early

²⁸ Flower, *History of the English Settlement in Edwards County*, 36.

²⁹ Birkbeck, *Notes on A Journey in America*, 132-133, 100.

³⁰ Fordham, *Personal Narrative*, 152-153.

morning freight; we sat perched up in the little watch tower of the caboose, precursor of the modern dome car. After a drive in a surrey of a few miles more, we came to the white oaks, a dense growth of huge trees almost as awe-inspiring as the California redwoods. Five adults with arms outstretched could not touch finger tips around the trunks of most of them and they seemed to soar immeasurably aloft, an unbelievably beautiful sight. Scattered sparsely over the dim forest floor were occasional wild flowers not often found in southern Indiana's woods today: frail white orchis, closed gentians, a few leaves of hepatica. But mostly we were conscious only of the majestic columns of the dark, towering, threatening trees, indeed an awesome sight; so might tall stalks of ripe wheat look to an ant crawling on the ground between them. "Climb into this," said young Mr. Nickey to me, motioning to a high two-wheeled cart near by. "I want to show you the maple swamp and the track is too narrow for the surrey." The maple swamp proved to be a more open spot in the forest, a thicket of sumac and other bushes. As we were threading our way along, he suddenly halted his horse, just as a loud whirring noise filled the air as if the whole forest were getting up. He seized my shoulder and spun me round: "Look quick," he said. "You'll never see that again as long as you live." It was a wild turkey, rising over the brush and lumbering off into the open, its wings dark against the sky.

Although the territory of the Pocket, outlined by its big rivers and crowded with trees, did not appeal to all Englishmen, or at least not to some of the most vocal, it looked like a paradise to most of them. In fact, it must have looked like Home, not only a place for a new home, and if any of them felt nostalgia for the white thorn hedges of the home counties, they had only to walk along the edges of the woodlands to see the flowering dogwoods. Almost all of Gibson County's first settlers were originally from the British Isles. The French and the Spanish were so few that they could be identified minus their names. "The Frenchman" who kept store in "the Long Ormary"; the "Spaniard" who was killed by a falling tree while passing by Robb's; the "Dutch woman" to whom George Brownlee was instructed by the county in 1821 to give a quart of wine—these were anonymous. But the English who came here in the first decade of 1800 were already Americans. Their fathers had settled first on the eastern seaboard, in Rhode Island, in Virginia, or in South

Carolina, and then had come by easy stages, by mule back, by ox cart, by pirogue or flatboat, through Pennsylvania, down the Ohio, or up over the mountains to Tennessee and to Kentucky, stopping in various places along the way to raise a crop of some kind or to make money by whatever skills they might possess so as to replenish their stores; they were thus beyond the pioneer stage when they reached the boundaries of the Hoosier State and were well qualified to select a permanent home. They knew what pitfalls to look out for and to avoid.

Many of the settlers disliked the social conditions created by slavery and were determined to leave the institution behind them. Many of them, having taken out good land elsewhere and lost it by a faulty title due to incompetent surveying, were not to be taken in a second time: they had heard that the Indiana system of land tenure was unassailable. One of the most beneficent and farseeing acts of Congress in organizing the Northwest Territory was that regulating the survey of the land: a system of rectangles based on meridians of longitude and parallels of latitude, it was easy to comprehend but hard to circumvent. When, after the Napoleonic wars and after our treaties with England and with the Indians, settlers began pouring into the state to take up government lands in the wilderness they were comforted and encouraged by the security this act of Congress afforded them. Some of course were moved by no such rational motives. They came because they were restless, because the pastures always look greener on the other side of the fence and they hoped to better their lot. They came because they wanted to see what the half-hidden blazed trails in the dim forests led to. They came because they were Englishmen and the lust "For to admire and for to see, for to be 'old this world so wide," always latent in an Englishman's breast, now broke all bounds. They came, too, because they were adventurous, because, in short, they were young. It was a movement of young people. In fact, Fordham thought perhaps it should be restricted to them. "I am not sure," he wrote, "that English elderly people would do right to pass the mountains. The ocean is a mere nothing; and if all I hear of Philadelphia and N. York be true, an English family with moderate property may fancy themselves in England *improved* on a hired farm. For young men, everybody agrees, that the Western territory will be the best to settle in. But, alas, it is another world; not only distant but distinct from Europe. . . ."⁸¹

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 62.

Not all of the young adventurers, however, would have agreed with him. They sent back glowing accounts to their elders and often the whole family group pulled up stakes and followed them; but it was the young people who set the tone. In Princeton there were few refugees from tyranny, few religious bigots or utopian dreamers. Nor were there penniless vagabonds. It took money to come West, as Fordham sternly asserted in a letter home: "you cannot do a greater favour to any young man, who possesses from 800£ to 5,000£, with a proper degree of spirit, than by sending him out here. But if he has no money, if he knows no mechanical trade, and if he cannot work,—he had better stay in a Counting house in England."³² Birkbeck emphasized that emigrants from Europe would do far better to push out westward past the eastern cities and the Atlantic states, because they could live cheaply in the West.³³

The settlers' reasons for remaining in the Pocket may not always have been founded on logic but their choice has proved to be a sagacious one. When the "terrible trees" were grubbed out with backbreaking labor, the earth was found to be extremely fertile, the soil deep and rich, producing wonderful crops of corn and wheat, while its treasures of oil and coal lay still concealed beneath its surface. The Ohio, the Wabash, the White River were of inestimable value as highways while the county was still a trackless jungle; they were not obstacles but roads. In fact, the county seat, Princeton, was thriving while as yet there were few roads. The records of Jones and Stockwell's store show the customers there in the first quarter of the century included many who came from Evansville, Sandersville, and Albion, as well as the furthest corners of the county itself—"John Johnson, 1 teakettle, 6.00, 4 lbs sugar, 3.75, Capt. [William] Olmstead, cash lent, 51.00, Samuel Watts, Burket Hughes, Theophilus Hughes," all of these and many others of Evansville, and "Wm. David, Cyntheann, mdse per bill rendered, 140.78."³⁴

It was the railroads above all, hailed at their advent as harbingers of progress, that, in developing little communities along their right of way, took away Princeton's importance as a distributing center and destroyed any dreams its founders

³² *Ibid.*, 174.

³³ Birkbeck, *Notes on A Journey in America*, 164-165.

³⁴ Daybooks of Jones and Stockwell. These ledgers are in the possession of the author.

might have had that it would become a great metropolis. It is now just a very nice town like many others, though still yearning to be a big commercial and manufacturing city. Perhaps if the first settlers in the Pocket could have been aware of how it would turn out, they would not grieve too much. A home was what they wanted, and though they were confident of their ability to build a state far superior to any that Europe could show, they were hard-headed and expected no miracles. The experience that most of them had had elsewhere in America had prepared them for the hard work that would be their portion in developing their new lands. In this they had a great advantage over the foreigners who came direct from the old countries, expecting an Eldorado. Their ability to look facts in the face and yet keep their ideals is exemplified in this letter written by Fordham, who would have made a good Hoosier if he had remained. "The Ohio river is not generally a picturesque object. It addresses itself powerfully to the imagination, but not to the senses. Its banks are clothed with dark forests. Here and there a small cabin peeps from the trees. Sometimes the rocks rise around you in solemnity and gloom—but at one place only, at the falls, do your eyes glance over any expanse of country.

"Nevertheless, I am more happy, more self-satisfied, on the banks of the Ohio, than ever I could have been on the fair plains of Old England. The forests of Indiana, the mountains of Kentucky, the wilds of the Illinois, if they are not so beautiful, yet their grandeur calls forth deeper, more sublime, emotions. They are the fields of enterprise, the cradle of freedom, the land of rest to the weary, the place of refuge to the oppressed. Every sound that issues from the woods, from the crashing tornado which rushes across entire regions, clothed in sheets of fire and shaking the hills to their foundations,—to the soft low murmur of an autumnal breeze,—all excites the most profound sentiments of adoration for the divine author of Nature,—all recall to man the uncertain duration of his existence; but these thoughts are unmixed with aught that can debase his worth or circumscribe his powers. These wildernesses are given to him alone: in them he is free; owning no master but his God, and no authority but that of reason and truth."⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Fordham. *Personal Narrative*. 187-188.