

Town Was Once Clinton County Seat, Sought Capital

Pioneer Looking for Open Land

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DEWITT — Capt. David Scott, a veteran of the War of 1812, was one of those Daniel Boone types who didn't hanker to have neighbors "too

close" — that is, within a dozen miles or so — which is how DeWitt came into existence.

Scott found New York state too confining after the War of 1812, so he moved on to Ann Arbor, a brand-new frontier

town, in 1825. Ann Arbor, in turn, became "too civilized," and in the spring of 1833, Scott picked his way up the Grand River Trail (parts of which still exist as Round Lake Road) until he came to a Chippewa Indian village

named Wabwahnasupu on the Looking Glass River.

COST WAS LOW

The high ground overlooking the Looking Glass was to be had at little cost from the federal government. Scott returned to Ann Arbor for his wife, Eunice, and children, David and Charles. In September, they loaded oxen-drawn wagons with household goods and headed west and north, taking a horse and 17 head of cattle. They forded rivers and drove through swamps, axle-deep, pitched their tents wherever night overtook them.

On Oct. 4, 1833, they arrived at their homesite, to establish the first permanent settlement in Clinton County — an event memorialized on a huge boulder in the old part of DeWitt Cemetery.

Three families of Indians welcomed the Scotts, loaning them one of their wigwams until the newcomers could build a log cabin on a site directly behind the present Municipal Building in Block 41, Section 8, DeWitt Township.

FIRST DEATH

While the Scotts were dwelling in this primitive bark habitation, a party of English travelers sought shelter while enroute to the village of Grand River — later, Portland. One of the members became ill and died. He was buried in a



THE HOTEL — Capt. David Scott built this hotel, called "Clinton House," between 1840 and 1842 and it became a social center of the village. It burned in 1930.



SCOTT MEMORIAL — A marker with a plaque honoring Capt. David Scott, founder of DeWitt, is located in the village cemetery.

Open Space Founded DeWitt

he coffin made of bark taken from the wigwam. This was the first recorded death of a white person in Clinton County.

Scott's acreage was considerable, even for that day. He had acquired 1,426 acres. However, like the early cattlemen of the plains, he had "open range." There wasn't a fence between his holdings and the Shiawassee River on the east and the Grand River on the south, with the result that his "pasture" comprised parts of what later became Eaton, Ingham, Clinton and Shiawassee counties.

Roundup time was just about any time for Capt. Scott. He spent a few interesting days seeking out and rounding up cattle which had strayed south to a particularly dense section of forest in a big bend of the Grand River to the south of his homestead, where there was no evidence of habitation.

Less than a decade later, the place where he found his cattle would become the site of Michigan's capital.

ONCE COUNTY SEAT

During the early years in DeWitt, the Scotts had to return to Ann Arbor periodically for supplies. Then, in 1839, he erected a frame building for a storeroom and grocery and a "public house" or tavern. This landmark was known simply as "Scott's," but it led, in 1840, to the little community being singled out as the governmental seat of Clinton County. The first court session here was held Oct. 2, 1840. This structure was on the

southeast corner of Bridge and Washington Streets.

Sometime between 1840 and 1842, Scott built a large hotel, the "Clinton House," on the southeast corner of Bridge and Main Streets. It became the social center of the community and is remembered by many living residents, having burned in 1930.

The boom in emigration up the Grand River Road from southeastern Michigan added up to boom times for the little village in the 1840s. The Grand River Road was a main-trav-

eled highway between Detroit and Grand Rapids, leading through DeWitt and Ionia, where the federal land office was located. Money from the Ionia office, where settlers deposited cash for land, was carried to Detroit via DeWitt in a wagon drawn by horses and guarded by soldiers. At DeWitt, the money boxes were unloaded and stashed away in a barred room of the hotel, with the soldiers sleeping within easy range to prevent possible pilfering.

Like many another Michi-

gan community, DeWitt put in its bid for the state capital in 1847. But, unlike most, DeWitt missed out by only one vote.

Then, in 1857, the county seat was removed to the newer village of St. Johns, after heated controversy.

There are still traces of the pioneer village. At 102 Webb St. is the home of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Klaver, a pioneer hostelry in the olden days, and the building that was the county jail still stands at 206 E. Washington St. It became a dwelling in 1862.



ONCE A JAIL.—The attractive home of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Tifford at 206 E. Washington St. was once the DeWitt jail. Irons that held prisoners can still be seen in the basement. (State Journal Photos)