
Friends of the Pecatonica River Foundation

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History Part 15 of 15

Just about every history of Freeport includes the story of how Tutty Baker's wife named the village Freeport. The Pecatonica River is the major actor in the drama leading to the development of Freeport as a community. By 1861 Freeport was large enough to have a city directory. Interesting information abounds in city directories. The 1868-1869 directory includes a year-by-year summary of Freeport's development.

The year, 1846, stands out for the Pecatonica River. This was the year that application was made by O. H. Wright, and E. S. Hanchett for incorporation, chartering the Hydraulic and Manufacturing Company of Stephenson County, to construct the dam at Freeport. The dam and millrace would form what would become known as manufacture's island. The power to run equipment was found in the rivers and gave an advantage over communities without waterpower.

At the point where the dam was constructed, the river was reported to be one hundred-twenty foot wide and seven foot deep. It was located directly east of the north end of Adams Street. The millrace was nine hundred feet long, fifty feet wide and six feet deep. The race returned to river just upstream of the Stephenson Street Bridge.

Mr. O. R. Wright owned half interest in the dam and the rest by John Lerch, Charles Powell and O. H. Goddard. The dam was begun in 1847. E. S. Hanchett carried out construction, but another source lists Jacob Zimmerman as doing the work. The dam was built of small trees and stone. Before the millrace was even completed Hanchett had constructed a sawmill on the future site of the Goddard flourmills. The sawmill provided "saw lumber" for the local community and adjoining counties and was operated until sometime in 1848.

In 1848, Hanchett transferred one-fourth of his interest in the dam to John Lerch. He reserved 500 cubic inches of water for his own use and one quarter remaining to Charles Powell. The end of the sawmill was the beginning of the flourmill, reportedly being capable of running four sets of stone. At this time Hanchett assigned the mill property, with his reserved title in the waterpower, to D. A. Knowlton who in turn sold the acquired property to Benjamin Goddard. In 1851 Goddard purchased the interest of Charles Powell and owns the franchise in conjunction with Webster & Rhodes. Goddard then owns five-eighths of the enterprise.

Manufacture's Island becomes home to Goddard's Mill, Webster & Rhodes' Mills, Emmert's manufactory, Stiles & Co.'s machine shop, and many other businesses.

The Illinois Northern Utilities Company purchased the land adjoining the dam in 1910 and operated a plant with five generators, of which two were in operation at the time of the dam's failure.

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