

KNOXVILLE, IOWA HISTORY

Knoxville is located in south-central Iowa, some 25 miles southeast of Des Moines. The area was originally inhabited by Native Americans of the Sac and Fox tribes. At that time, prairie grass covered the countryside at heights of 8 to 10 feet. In 1835, Dragoons first explored the Des Moines River valley through this area. In 1842, the Sac and Fox Indians signed a treaty to sell lands in central Iowa to the new settlers known as the New Purchase of 1842. By 1843, settlers began moving here. The first Marion County Courthouse was erected three years later.

Knoxville was founded in 1845 when Joseph Robinson and James Montgomery, Commissioners from Scott and Wapello County, selected the site for Knoxville and designated it as the county seat. They named Knoxville in honor of General Henry Knox, hero of the Revolutionary War. The City's main streets are named after Robinson and Montgomery.

County surveyor Isaac B. Powers platted part of the town in September 1845, shortly after it was located. Clairborne Hall laid out the remainder of the town in the winter of 1846-47. Additional surveys were made in December 1849 and September 1852. The first sale of lots on October 21, 1845 saw the best sites in town go for \$15 to \$65. The first survey made the streets 80 feet wide, alleys 10 feet wide, and lots 120' x 60', but the third survey changed the width of the streets to 50 feet, and made the blocks 265' x 240'.

The first Marion County courthouse was built on a lot owned by L.C. Corny. Contractor Lewis M. Pearch started work on May 29, 1846 at a cost of approximately \$80,000. Knoxville remained an unincorporated village until 1853, when a movement for incorporation began. A judicial order was issued after an election in which 64 votes were cast in favor of incorporation, with 4 votes against. Knoxville was duly incorporated as a City in 1855.

Preaching services were held in Knoxville as early as 1845 when it belonged to a chain of preaching places known as Whitebreast Mission, Ottumwa District, Iowa Conference; James F. New was pastor. The first Knoxville church was built by the Methodist and dedicated May 28, 1865 on Lots 6 & 7, Block 28 (at present-day 505 and 509 East Main). The land for the church had been donated. The Reverend John Jay was the first minister.

Knoxville's first public library began in 1909 in a room inside the courthouse where the library association housed a small collection of books for lending. It was made a City institution in 1911, under the leadership of President Mrs. S.C. Johnston, Secretary Amanda Elliot, and Treasurer Ella McClure. The present library of brick construction was dedicated July 1, 1912 and made possible through the generosity of Andrew Carnegie.

Knoxville's first volunteer fire company was organized in 1865 but did not flourish. In 1874 a 50 member bucket brigade was formed with Fred Christofel as drill leader. John Merrill was the first

fire chief. A fourth class post office was established in March 2, 1846 with Lysander W. Babbitt as postmaster. It was elevated to third class on October 1, 1870 and second class by July 1907. Rural free delivery service was inaugurated in 1900. City deliveries were established in May 1900 with three regular routes.

The Marion County Fair Association was first organized in 1854 with the first fair being held in 1859 on the grounds just north of the present location. Fairs were continued until 1891, when the Iowa Driving Park put the fair out of business. Later, when interest in stock breeding increased, the County Fair was revived, the Association leased the old ground, and new buildings were erected.

The Knoxville Electric Light and Power Company was organized in 1887. In 1894, a bad fire in the plant seriously hurt the operations. Early in the century, J. S. Bellamy and Mary A. Bellamy bought controlling interest in the company, and in 1914 it became the Marion County Electric Company. In January 1926, the Iowa Power & Light Company took over the lines.

The first bank was established in 1869. Prior to that time, the only banking done in Knoxville was through brokers J.E. Neal and Larkin Wright. The Iowa State Savings Bank was established in 1903 and the Community National Bank & Trust in 1933. Also Knoxville's first Mayor was Cambridge Culbertson who served from March 1893 to July 1896. Knoxville has had 31 mayors since then (includes Culbertson who served 4 different terms).

Knoxville is also the birthplace of the Iowa State flag, designed by Dixie Cornell Gebhardt, and adopted by Iowa's General Assembly in 1921. The U.S. Patent Office issued Mrs. Cornell a copyright for the flag in 1921.

