

THE HISTORY OF CLARK COUNTY

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and transcribed by [Crystal Wendt](#).

THE BATTLE FOR THE COUNTY SEAT.

"This fight did last from break of day
Till setting of the sun:
For when they rung the evening bell
The battle scarce was done."

Ballad of Chevy Chase.

The first election of county officers for Clark County was held at O'Neill's Mill as the present Neillsville was then called, on the 7th day of November, A.D. 1854. At this election there was to be chosen a representative in congress, legislative officers' certain county officers, and under the law, the question of the removal of the county seat from Section 2, Town 24, Range 2 west, where the act of the legislature located it, to the west half of Section 14, Town 24, 2 west (O'Neill's Mill) was to be submitted to the voters for their decision.



O'Neill's Mill as it appeared in 1875

At this date the county did not perhaps contain a population of two hundred all told, men, women and children.

The next year in June, 1855, the State census was taken and the total population of the county was only 232, yet at this election on the question of county seat removal, there was cast one hundred and sixty-three votes. Ninety votes were in

favor of removal and seventy-three votes were against removal. The vote on congressman and county officers was not so large. For congress, C. C. Washburn received 107 votes and Charles Hoyt, his opponent, received 29. W. J. Gibson received the largest number of votes for the office of State senator, and Chas. A. Stevens received the greatest vote for member of assembly.

B. F. French was elected county treasurer by a handsome majority over his opponent Thomas Wilson, who received a beggarly sixteen votes.

It appears by the record of the canvassers that Mr. French was not only a candidate for county treasurer but that he was also a candidate for the office of clerk of the board of supervisors, He was defeated for that office by Samuel C. Boardman who received 98 votes to French's 35. Mr. Boardman our first clerk, not to be outdone appears to have been a candidate for three offices; not only that, but he succeeded in getting elected to two of them. For the office of register of deeds he received seventy-four votes, to sixty-seven for R. McCaleps, and he was duly declared elected. He also was third in a triangular contest for county surveyor; Allen Boardman was also a candidate but Moses Clark defeated both the Boardman's by a large majority, and was declared elected.

There were no other county officers elected at that time, but there were several amendments proposed to the Constitution that were submitted, and voted upon at the election. They appear however to have been given scant consideration, as there were only then votes cast on the subject, nine being in favor of the amendments and one against.

Referring to the large vote cast upon the county seat proposition in 1854 it is to be noted that eleven years after, at the general election held for state officers, the entire vote cast in the county of Clark was then only 138. Thus it will be seen that this county with a population according to the census of 1865 of 1001, cast twenty-five votes less that year than it did in 1854 with a population of only two hundred.

It is evident that a very large number of votes were cast by persons who were not residents of the county. The contest between O'Neill's Mill and Weston Rapids (or Hardscrable as its opponents termed it) was exceedingly bitter and each side rallied all its adherents for the fray. Notwithstanding the abnormal vote that was cast it is a fact, well established by the testimony of living witnesses, that a number of the cohorts of the clan Weston, although within a few rods of the polling booth at O'Neill's house were absolutely unable to cast their votes. If they had done so we would have had our county polling more votes than it had residents, including men, women and children.

The story is that O'Neill's house, where the polls were held was a barrel of whiskey in the cellar. During the morning, and after it was discovered, several of the adherents of O'Neill's Mill had been helping themselves freely which aroused the ire of the "gude wife," who ordered it taken out of the house, and thereupon it was conveyed across the creek to the saw mill on the north side. Shortly after the main body of the Hardscrable voters came on their way to the polls, and found the whiskey.

It is claimed that they had a great storage capacity for the fluid, and that they soon lowered a goodly portion of the contents of the barrel, and afterwards became in

such a condition that many of them were unable to walk across the boom, that united the north and south sides of O'Neill creek. There was no bridge then, and to get to the polls, one had to "walk the plank."

Rome, the great Capital was, we are told, once saved by the cackling of geese -- Neillsville was saved by a barrel of whiskey.

This is sad to contemplate, for only a year before the State of Wisconsin enacted Prohibition by a popular vote of the people. The canvas of the election was made by B. F. French, town clerk of the town of Pine Valley and by Moses Clark, justice of the peace.

The law required the canvassing board to consist of the town clerk and two justices, but the record of the canvass, recites that there was no other justice of peace in the county except Clark.

It may be noted that a few years later Moses Clark was killed at or near Neillsville by a man named Polley. The slayer was indicted for murder, but his trail was bad in one of the southern counties of the State but he was not convicted.

The first county board of supervisors consisted of the town board of the town of Pine Valley. That town existed when it was one of the towns of Jackson county, and after the creation of the new county, the town supervisors became ex-officio, the county board of supervisors of Clark County.

The first meeting of the county board, consisting of the chairman and side supervisors of the town of Pine Valley was held at the dwelling house of James

O'Neill on the 14th day of November, 1854. The members were James O'Neill, James French, and Edward Tomkins.

The first official act was to elect by ballot a chairman, and James O'Neill was duly elected to the place. At this session the board fixed the bond of the county treasurer

at the sum of five hundred dollars, and then took an adjournment until the 1st of January, 1855, at which adjourned meeting, the clerk of the board was directed to purchase suitable books for the county, with the first money, that should come into the treasury, or "if no moneys comes in" to purchase them at the expense of the county.

They also ordered that the offices of county treasurer, clerk of the board supervisors, and the register of deeds should be kept at the house of James O'Neill. At the same meeting of the board an order was passed directing the clerk of board of supervisors to purchase a seal for the county, at the very earliest period that there was money in the treasury, the device of the seal to be a "river with a large pine on its bank."

It will be noted that no sheriff, district attorney, or clerk of circuit court were elected at the first election. This arose from the fact that until 1858 Clark county was attached to Jackson county for judicial purposes.

The first Sheriff of the county was Adna S. Morgan. The first district attorney was B. F. French, and the first clerk of the circuit court was Samuel C. Boardman. The

seal for the office of clerk of the court was ordered in 1858. The first term of the circuit court was held at Neillsville on September 7, 1858. Judge George Gale of Trempealeau county presided. The court was in session but one day. At this term of court G. Y. Freeman of Galesville was admitted to the bar on motion of William T. Price, B. F. Chace was admitted as an attorney on motion of George W. King, and B. F. French (district attorney) and Samuel Dickinson were also admitted to practice on motion of Carl C. Pope.

The first person to be admitted to full citizenship, which was also at this first term of the court was George Frantz who then and there renounced all allegiance to the King of Prussia. Mr. Franz is still living in the town of Pine Valley about a mile from Neillsville where he has continuously resided for more than half a century.

The original plat of the village of Neillsville was executed by James O'Neill and his wife, on the 14th day of April, 1858. It embraced but a very small portion of what is now the city of Neillsville.

In May, 1856, a tax of \$2000 was levied by the county board of supervisors for the purpose of building a court house. In November, 1856, the Public Square where the present court house stands, was purchased from James O'Neill for the sum of three hundred dollars.

On January 2nd, 1857, the bids for building a court house were received, and the contract for building it was awarded to James Furlong for the sum of eighteen hundred dollars. The successful bidder however withdrew his bid, and Edward Furlong, his brother, being the next lowest, bidder was given the contract for the sum of eighteen hundred and ninety-five dollars.

This amount was not for a complete building, afterwards contracts were awarded for building chimneys and putting an underpinning under the structure.

The court house was used until the present court house was built. The old court house, still stands in Neillsville on 5th Street, less than two blocks from its old location, and is now used as a dwelling house and express office. It was a frame building then, but has been remodeled, and veneered with brick, so that its oldest friend would not recognize it. The old building was two stories in height, painted white. It comprised within it a very moderate sized court room and one jury room, on the upper floor; they were approached from below by two inside stairways, one on the north and the other on the south side of the building. On the first floor were six offices for the use of the county officers. They were very small in size, and were not much larger than a good respectable state room on an ocean steamer. However in the early days the county officials did not put much time in their offices. Persons having business with county officials looked them up at their homes or place of business. If they simply desired to examine the records, they seldom troubled the officers, but would go in and help themselves. That is they did so if the office door was not locked. In case it was locked (which was infrequent) they went through the window, which was never locked.

There were no vaults nor safes in those days, and the records could always be found lying on the table or floor as the case might be, staring one in the face.

It appears that in a spasm of officials vireos, the county board in February, 1859, passed an order compelling the register of deeds, sheriff, clerk of court to keep their offices in the court house, but that the county treasurer (Chauncey Blakeslee) might hold his office at his store in the village of Neillsville.