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*The Neillsville Press*  
*Jan. 22, 1925*

## LIFE OF FOUNDER OF NEILLSVILLE

(The following is a biography of James O'Neill Sr., founder of Neillsville, and was first published in "The Sketch Book" in 1875. James O'Neill Sr., was an uncle of Judge James O'Neill of this city).

### SKETCH OF HON. JAMES O'NEILL

The subject of our sketch, was born in the town of Lisbon, St. Lawrence county, New York, May 4th, 1810. His father Andrew O'Neill, was a native of Ireland, and was distantly related to the family of the same name, who have been possessed for many centuries of a vast estate around Lake Neagh, and whose members have been so famous in the political history of that country. His family had always been Protestants and in the Irish wars took side of the English Kings. In his youth he had received a University education. After the American revolution, and about the year 1785, he came to this country, going first to Washington, thence to New York, and finally to Canada. In Western New York, he was engaged for some time in surveying. At Edwardsburg, Canada, he taught school, and about the year 1796 married a young lady who had been one of his pupils, and with her made the first settlement of the town of Lisbon, immediately opposite, on the banks of the St. Lawrence.

James was the third of nine children. He resided at home until he was seventeen, assisting his father in agricultural pursuits in summer, as soon as old enough, and attending the district school in the winter. He never received anything more than a district school education, his younger brothers faring better in this respect. At the age of seventeen, he went to live with his eldest brother, Thomas, who had engaged in trade across the river, at Edwardsburg. Here he remained as his brother's clerk for two years. When he was about twenty

down the river to Montreal. Upon James' return on the second day of August of the same year, he was taken down with fever, from which he did not recover until winter. Having regained his health, he attended school during the winter, which was the last opportunity of the kind he ever enjoyed. His brother, John, now a wealthy merchant of Cleveland, Ohio, then kept store at Ogdensburg, New York. James assisted him as a clerk during most of 1832. At the close of the same year he went to Canada and engaged in lumbering on his own account for nearly four years. He would get out square timber in the winter and run it down the Nation and St. Lawrence rivers in the summer to Quebec. For two years, this business proved profitable, but during the last he lost twelve hundred dollars, which was then his all.

In the winter of 1835-6, he and his brothers, Henry and Alexander, both of whom have resided at Neillsville, and will be remembered by the early settlers, lumbered in Lisbon, N. Y., buying stumpage of Stephen Van Rennsalaer, and putting the timber into the St. Lawrence. In the spring of 1836, they rafted this and ran it to Quebec. Upon their return in June, 1836, James took steamer at Ogdensburg for the west, bidding his father and mother good bye for the last time. He did not see his old home again for twenty-nine years. From Ogdensburg, he went to Lewistown, Niagara Falls and Buffalo, thence by steamer to Cleveland, Ohio, going from the latter place to Knox county, Ohio, where he worked during harvesting. In October of the same year, he went by wagon to Cincinnati by way of Columbus, Akron and Xenia. There were no railroads in those days. Thence by steamer down the Ohio and Mississippi, he proceeded to Grand Gulf, where he hired out to chop cord wood in Concordia Parish, La., at one dollar per cord and his board. Between the second day of November, 1836, and the last week in February, 1837, he

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Mississippi, at ninety dollars per month. The water in the river would become warm in summer and so filled with decayed vegetable matter and dead alligators that the boatmen would first swallow a mouthful of water and then a little whiskey to counteract the effect. The boats in going up the river carried corn, bacon, etc.; coming back their cargo was cotton, which they unloaded at Grand Gulf. The banks failed generally during that year, and O'Neill was paid off in depreciated currency. In June, 1837, he took steamer and came to St. Louis, where he was taken down with bilious fever, from which he did not recover for over two months. His brother, Alexander, joined him here, and together they went to St. Clair county, Ill., and took a job of getting out railroad ties. Soon after James was taken with ague and Alexander with typhoid fever. The former was sick for nearly a year. In April, 1838, they both went to Galena. There James hired out as a steerman at forty dollars a month on a steamer called the "Science". In this capacity, he spent the whole summer, running up the Wisconsin river to Fort Winnebago, now Portage City, and down the Mississippi as far as Keokuk. About the first of Nov., the boat was sunk on the upper rapids, about eight miles below Port Bryon, Ill. The ensuing winter, O'Neill chopped cord wood again in Louisiana. But the repeated attacks of fever from which he suffered, had so broken down his constitution that he could not chop more than half as much as he did before.

In April, 1839, he returned to St. Louis, where he hired out as a deck hand on a steamboat to run up the Illinois river. Having made a single trip, he came to Prairie du Chien where he became a pilot on the steamer "Ariel", a boat plying between the latter place and the lower rapids. During the last few years and since his arrival upon the Mississippi, his health had been very poor. In the fall of 1839, he became convinced that it would not be safe for him longer to remain on the river. Accordingly in September of the same year, he and Alexander, the brother before mentioned, procured a large canoe, filled it with provisions at

a place three miles below Black River Falls, Wisconsin. Here they built a saw mill. In 1844, James removed to what is now Neillsville, where he has ever since resided. It will be unnecessary to repeat in this connection much of what has already been written in this sketch of Neillsville, which appears herewith, and to which the reader is referred. Mr. O'Neill has been the moving spirit of the place since its first settlement. No one has taken such pride or interest in its prosperity.

He built the first log cabin and has lived to see the forests give way to one of the most beautiful places in Wisconsin. On the sixth day of March, 1846, he was married to Jane Douglas, a very estimable lady. So it will be seen that Mr. O'Neill had passed considerably into the realm of bachelorhood, having reached the age of thirty-six. Mrs. O'Neill died in 1873. The citizens of Neillsville universally bear testimony to her good qualities. She was a woman of a decided religious turn of mind, and is said to have done much for the churches of the place. The issue of this marriage was three children, Isabella, Maria and Thomas. The daughters still live in Neillsville. Thomas died in 1872, when about twenty years of age.

Mr. O'Neill was elected to the Assembly of Wisconsin in 1848, and was accordingly a member of the first legislature of the state which met in January, 1849. What are now Clark and Jackson counties were then a part of Crawford county. Mr. O'Neill set out in December for Madison, going overland by team, by way of Prairie du Chien, Lancaster, Mineral Point, Dodgeville and Blue Mound. There was only one settler between Black River Fall until within ten miles of Prairie du Chien, and this was a Dutchman named Metzger, who lived on Coon Prairie. O'Neill's team had to walk all the way and break the road through the snow. On his return, he came afoot by way of Sauk City, Baraboo, New Lisbon and Black River Falls. The man Findley, who is now a pauper in Levis, Clark county, was then a prominent business man at New Lisbon, and with him O'Neill stopped over night. From his place to Black River Falls

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nights, alone, having no blankets, but carrying a small ax with which to cut fire-wood.

In 1868, he was again elected to the legislature, his opponent being Chauncey Blakeslee, over whom he received a large majority. In 1848, W. T. Price, who ran as a Whig. W. T. Price, who ran as a whig. Since 1856, he has been a zealous republican. In political matters he has always adhered to the motto: "Principles not men." No promise of preferment or pecuniary advantage could swerve him from the path which seemed to him right.

The esteem with which he has been held by his fellow citizens may be seen from the numerous positions of trust in which they have placed him. From the year 1861 to 1865, he was County Treasurer; for about fifteen years he was Chairman of the County Board of Supervisors; at different times he has held the position of Justice of the Peace, Town Treasurer, and like offices.

Several years ago, he built a large and elegant hotel, which he kept for some time. It still bears his name and does credit to the place. He has given lands for school purposes, a site for the Methodist Church, besides a large gift in money, and several large lots in the heart of Neillsville for county buildings. The poor and destitute have always been objects of his benefactions. If Mr. O'Neill had the niggardly and acquisitive faculty of some men, he might today be a millionaire; as it is, he has acquired a handsome competence, owning much valuable pine land in Clark county, and a great many village lots in Neillsville. No

one has ever been heard to charge him with dishonestly obtaining a dollar. In this respect his life is a shining example to the young men who may chance to know him.

Mr. O'Neill is not a man of words, but of action. Occasionally he is very entertaining in conversation, but usually he is very quiet. Physically he is a very powerful man, weighing nearly two hundred pounds. His height is about six feet, and he measures about the chest, forty-two inches. In his younger days his muscular ability was something remarkable. His hair and whiskers are slightly mixed with grey. At sixty-five there are no signs of baldness.

For the last two years, Mr. O'Neill has not been actively engaged in business, but simply attends to the management of his pine land and village property.

His life has been one of hard and unremitting labor. Most of us would shudder at the thought of having to endure the hardships which he has undergone. His record, as it comes to the writer, is creditable, having in it few things which one could wish blotted out. Human nature was always imperfect. In judging men, it is not well to look entirely at either faults or virtues, but weigh both together. If the latter are great in comparison with the former, it is all we ought to expect. In the life which we have been tracing, the bad is as infinitesimal in comparison with the good, as the artificial fountain in our parlors are smaller than the cataract of Niagara.



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Neillsville Press  
December 21, 1922.

### HISTORIC BUILDING

#### TORN DOWN

Last week a small frame building standing at the west end of the W. J. Marsh store was torn down. It is said to be the first school house built in Neillsville. Later it became a meat market. Forty-six years ago Thomas and Jesse Lowe came here, going into the meat business. They used this building for their meat market for several years. Later it was used for storing hides, and for many years past has stood there used occasionally for storage of different materials. It had grown quite dilapidated and unsightly and its removal is an improvement to that locality. The old landmarks of Neillsville are gradually disappearing.

Neillsville Press  
March 15, 1923.

### A BIT OF PIONEER HISTORY

Judge James O'Neill recently received from Mrs. S. E. Hutchings now living in Los Angeles, an old copy of The Republican and Press of Jan. 28, 1904. This paper contains an account of the "old settlers" meeting held at the Opera House on Jan. 21, 1904. The news items in the old paper now reads like ancient history. Among the names mentioned are M. C. Ring, Harry Mead, Sam Hutchings, C. W. Dewey, J. W. McAdams and others who have passed away or moved to other places; but the principal feature of that issue of the paper was a paper read by Judge O'Neill at the old settlers' gathering, in which is recorded historic events of Clark County, still more ancient. Facts of the county's early settlement are recorded and interesting accounts of early sessions of court and the county board. The paper read by Mr. O'Neill tells of the admission to the bar of B. F. French, C. C. Pope, S. N. Dickinson, G. W. King and B. F. Chase. At another session of court Henry Counsell, Edward Huckstead, Chas. Hyslip, Martin Moran and Michael Farning were admitted to citizenship. The first circuit court jury that ever sat on a case in Clark county consisted of Orson Bacon, C. Hyslip, Levi Marsh, Wm. Wheaton,

been held in 1858, though Mrs. Levi Archer, who was present at the old settlers' meeting stated that she attended such a celebration in 1857 and Judge J. R. Sturdevant who is still living in Neillsville, stated that he remembered this celebration, and that George Frantz, Sr. played the drum which consisted of a beer keg with the ends knocked out and deer skin stretched over the openings, and the salute was fired by a local character known as "One-Eyed" Riley, Mr. Sturdevant stated that in those days, settlement was made with the county treasurer by his showing the committee a balance sheet on which was the amount he claimed to have on hand, and the committee took his word for it. The history of the county is sketched in this paper by Judge O'Neill down to date. Among the old settlers that he mentions few are left.

One of the events mentioned, worth repeating is the fact that the pine tree growing in front of what is now Otto Neverman's home, was planted in 1862 by a man named Bill Berry and was about two inches in diameter when planted. Its circumference at the date of the Old Settlers' party in 1904 was 5 feet 3½ inches. Its present diameter, March 9, 1923, is 6 feet, 6 inches, measured a foot above the ground.

No doubt there are laid away in many homes a copy of this old paper of January 28, 1904, because it contains the record of the Old Settlers' party and the still older record read that night by Judge O'Neill. The record read by him that night from which has been quoted, opens with a quotation from Prof. Adams, the historian: "The trash of today, becomes the treasure of tomorrow." This is indeed often true.

Neillsville Press  
January 29, 1925.

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(Continued from last week)

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