

Hunters: B'ham's 'First Family'

Adventuring Pair Arrives in 1819

By MARY BAHN
Staff Writer

Birmingham's population increased more than 700 per cent since its emergence in 1819 to its incorporation in 1864, only 45 years later.

Seems unlikely? Not if you recall (and most true-blue residents do) that the first settlers numbered two: John W. Hunter and his brother, Daniel.

They were among American explorers who scanned the continent in search of lush lands, freed for public use by a congressional act in 1818. The Hunter brothers, anxious for a homesite for their families, were among the first to leave their home in Auburn, New York for the unknown.

AFTER TRAVELING by sleigh across Canada, crossing the Detroit River over the ice, they arrived in Detroit in March of 1818. One year later, they put up their "Home Sweet Home" shingle, probably on a tree in what is now Bloomfield township.

Other pioneers who closely followed the Hunter brothers and their newly-arrived families included Elijah Willits and John Hamilton, Dr. Ziba Swan and family, Amasa Bagley and family, William Morris, Ezra Baldwin and family, and Sidney Dole.

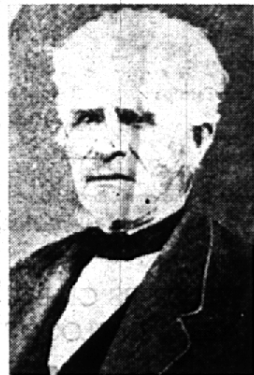
The first problem that faced the hardy pioneers was that of housing, quickly solved by John Hunter who in ten days time erected a log cabin near the Saginaw Trail. By mistake, however, it was located on the Willits tract instead of his own as he had supposed. That spot today is now Muhlolland's store and Willits street, set back from the trail.

After realizing his mistake, Hunter erected another cabin which served as Birmingham's first tavern. Probably sensing a good investment, John Hamilton opened his own tavern, which also was his residence, near the spot where the Detroit Bank & Trust now stands. Not wanting to be outdone, Elijah Willits built a third tavern-dwelling opposite the Hamilton house.

THUS THE TOWN'S first three settlers all erected taverns, standing but a few rods apart. The taverns of Hamilton and Willits became noted stopping places for weary travelers, but Hunter soon moved to Royal Oak.

Although the settlers suffered some hardships that first winter, subsisting on a diet of salt pork, corn meal and potatoes, varied by venison and bear meat, the soil was rich and they prospered.

Attracted by reports of their success, the area saw new faces; among them were Deacon Eliza S.



JOHN HUNTER

Fish, Daniel Ball, Asa Castle and his son, Lemuel, in 1820. The daughter of Elijah Fish and his wife, born a month after they came to the settlement, was the first child born in the township. The little girl lived only a short time however.

The section now bounded by Pierce, Lincoln, Southfield and 14 Mile Road looked good to Daniel Ball, as he decided to stake his land claim there.

AS A BUFFER against the hardships endured by the first handful of settlers, religion played a large role in their lives.

As far back as 1821, an itinerant Methodist preacher, traveling up the Rouge river, held impromptu meetings in the Willits' barn.

Soon after that, Deacon Fish held the first meetings of the Presbyterian sect in his home, while Sunday afternoon was reserved by Methodists for services at the home of Dr. Ezra Parke, beginning in 1822. The doctor himself conducted the services, while his wife sang hymns.

When the Methodist Church became officially organized in 1827, led by the Rev. William Pattee, the settlement became known as Piety Hill.

AS IN MOST frontier settlements of that era, times were hard. Frank Durkee, one settler, cut and burned more than 100 trees one winter and sold the ashes for lye-making. He received in payment one pair of boots, one bushel basket, a few groceries and six yards of calico. In relation to this pay, tea cost from \$1.75 to \$2 per pound—when it could be found.

John Hamilton—who by his activities seemed a mighty public-spirited person—welcomed the first government of the settlement in his home in May, 1827 when Bloomfield Township was organized. The board of inspectors included Samuel Satterlee, Laban Jenks and Elijah S. Fish.

Township officers elected for the following year included Lemuel Castle, supervisor; Ezra S. Parke, clerk; John Todd, Joseph Park and Abraham Crawford, assessors; John Ellenwood, John W. Hunter and William Lee, commissioners of highways; Wilkes Durkee and Anglo Dewey Jr., postmasters; Oliver Torry, collector; Erastus Burt and Oliver Torry, constables.



THE FIRST FRAME house in Birmingham was occupied by none other than the city's first settler, John West Hunter. Dating back to 1822, the house was built by a carpenter, George Taylor, on a rise of ground

on the west side of what is now Woodward Avenue. Pictured as it looked in 1881, the home is now occupied by Mrs. Alice N. White, widow of Kirby White. It is located at 264 W. Brown.

Fifteen road overseers, nine fence-viewers and three poundmasters were also elected. A bounty was offered by the township on wolves at \$5 a head, and the poor of the locality were provided with an appropriation of \$50.

The birth of an official governing body signaled the rise of commercialism in the township. Stores came and so did factories.

Elijah Willits started a tannery in 1827 and in 1828, Hunter began the operation of a blacksmith's shop and foundry. Hamilton's tavern developed into a hotel—the National House—where the Detroit Bank & Trust stands today.

PIETY HILL saw its first store in 1833 thanks to Sullivan Kelsey, who also operated the post office. Birmingham had taken its first step towards prosperity.

Seeing the possibilities, Roswell T. Merrill and his son-in-law, William Brown, bought the Hunter foundry in 1832. Orrin Poppleton, son of a Troy township pioneer, opened the third store in Piety Hill, while the first brick building in town was erected by Merrill for T. A. Flowers, the new postmaster, in 1831.

The middle of the century saw Birmingham grow into an industrial town, dotted with factories and foundries which had sprung up. This proved to be the basis for the official naming of the town in 1832, when Hugh Irving suggested "Birmingham" because he was reminded by the flourishing industries of his old home in Birmingham, England. The next morning, a large sign bearing his suggested name appeared on the front of Merrill's foundry.

The character of the town changed again, however, as small fires burned down the factories, which were never rebuilt. Once again, the town settled down into a farming town so pleasant for residences.

TIMES PASSED QUICKLY—1839—the railroad arrives in the community.

1864—incorporation, with J. C. K. Crooks as president of the board of seven trustees ruling over the one square mile area.

1874—inauguration of the water works, followed by a fire tower and the first volunteer fire department.

About this time "Mattie" Baldwin was influential in getting the Ladies' Library Association started.

1885—passage of a new village

★ ★ ★ Youngest Hunter Brother

An Unsung Pioneer

Rufus Hunter, the youngest of the three Hunter brothers who were Birmingham's first settlers, seems to have taken a "back seat" to the posterity bestowed on the elder members of his family.

He was a part, however, of the entire family group that is mentioned in early county records as pioneering the 1819 wilderness of Bloomfield and what is now the city of Birmingham. Besides the brothers, John, Daniel and Rufus, other pioneers included John's wife and two young daughters; John's parents, Elisha and Hulda, and his brother-in-law, William Hall.

The family remained together for several years, working as a unit. Rufus stated in the later years of his life that he was 15 years old when he first came into the territory.

HE RECALLED that soon after their arrival he, his brother John and John Hamilton (another pioneer) walked to Graham's at Paint Creek (Rochester) and brought back to the settlement three bushels of red potatoes for seed, each carrying a bushel upon his shoulders.

The potatoes were planted in the spring of 1819 and were the first seed planted by white men in Bloomfield.

The Hunter family separated in 1824, with Elisha settling in South-

charter providing six commissioners.

1885—Electric cars come to Birmingham!

THE TURN OF THE CENTURY saw Birmingham bloom into the bustling, but charming city that it is today. Woodward Avenue became widened into a superhighway in 1925, while the Hunter cut-off was begun in 1931.

Other improvements were made: new schools were built, new public buildings erected and beautiful homes were built in the town and the surrounding areas that gave this area its renowned provincial air.

Like the pioneers of yesterday, Birmingham city fathers and its residents remain a close-knit community, always striving to improve the city. Today, the town boasts of a population of 26,600 people, whose average income per household is more than \$19,500.

field township, buying 160 acres of government land in the southwest quarter. With him went his sons, Daniel and Rufus, and his son-in-law, William Hall.

The life of Rufus Hunter falls into obscurity with only a few glimpses here and there of activities. To help in his hard life as a farmer, Rufus took in a young farm hand, William Erity, in 1843 and boarded him until he was 21.

BY 1861 Rufus had retired from farming and was living with his newly-acquired wife, Mrs. Adelaide North from Pontiac, in Hunter's home on the southwest corner of Henrietta and Merrill, a house which still is standing.

Rufus Hunter died in February, 1878, with consumption at the erroneously reported age of 79. It is very likely that a clerk made a mistake in copying the age, which should have been 74 if Rufus was 15 when he arrived in the territory.

Captain Bigelow Fought with Gen. George Custer

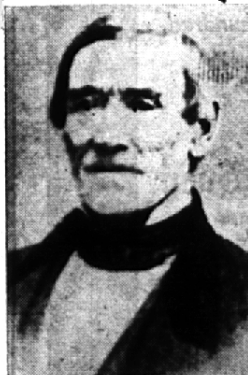
John Allen Bigelow was a young lad when he enlisted with the northern forces in the Civil War. His war life was dangerous and eventful but he emerged from it with the title of captain, having advanced from a private's rank.

During his first enlistment, he was captured by the Confederates and at Andersonville prison, suffered the privations of a Yankee prisoner.

AFTER SOME time, however, he was released and just as soon as possible, re-enlisted under the name of John Allen. He served his country under Gen. George A. Custer, with whom he became a warm and personal friend.

In 1865, Bigelow lost his left arm and from that suffered greatly during his long and busy life.

Dr. J. W. Smith, of Detroit, paid Capt. John Allen Bigelow a visit in 1912. They talked over the days of 1865 when this same doctor amputated Bigelow's arm twice in eight days.



JOHN HAMILTON