Hunters: B'ham's 'First Family'

Adventuring Pair Arrives in 1819

BY MARY BARN
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Birmingham's population increased more than 700 percent since its incorporation in 1819, only 45 years later.

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

They, we learn, are American explorers who scanned the continent in search of lush lands, and found such an area by a congressional act in 1818. The两者 chose a homestead for themselves, among the first to locate in their homestead, 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" signboard, 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 Tallow.

The town was surveyed in 1819, a map showing that the hundred acres that would be Bloomfield was then 300 acres. The town was named for a homestead, the first located in the township.

After realizing his mistake, Hunter erected another cabin which served as Birmingham's first tavern—later the town of Bloomfield.

The town of Bloomfield and William became known as stopping places for travelers, and the Hunter brothers soon moved to Royal Oak.

Although the settlers suffered hardships that first winter, including 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 Elijah N.

THE FIRST FRAME house that the brothers built was one of the city's first, and the city's first, Joshua West back in 1822. The house was later occupied by George Taylor, on a house-front.

Fifteen road overseers, nine fence-viewers, and three plow masters were also elected. A society was formed by the town to support the first infant born in the township. The little girl lived only a short time.

The section now bounded by Mt. Pleasant, E. Howard, and Mt. Pleasant Road was homemade in a hotel—The National House—where the Detroit Bank & Trust stands today.

FIETT HILL saw its first store in 1832 thanks to Sullivan Keller, who also operated the post office. Birmingham had its first step toward prosperity.

The town of Birmingham grew into an industrial center, with factories and foundries, and industries, which sprang up nearby. It proved to be the center in the spring of 1819 and was soon to become known as Piety Hill.

IN ALL MOST ALL the settlements of that era, times were hard. The streets, clean, cut and burrowed more than 100 times a year and sold the ashes for fuel. The soil drained in payment by the bucket, one barrel (a bushel), a few pounds and six yards of cull. In addition to the pay, a ten-cent tax from the state to fill the bucket, which could be met. John Hunter, who, by his activities seemed to be a public spirited person—welcomed the building of government of the settlement in his house in May, 1827 when the town of Bloomfield Township was organized.

The board of inspectors included Samuel Satterlee, Abner Jackson and J. R. Fish.

Township officers elected for the following year included Elijah Willits, supervisor; Ezra E. Parke, clerk; John Todd, Joseph Park and Abraham Crawford, assessors; John Ewell, John W. Hunter, and William Lewis, commissioners of highways; William Darbee and Asa Shattuck, constables; Oliver Tarry, collector; Erastus Burt and Oliver Tarry, constables.

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The town of Bloomfield, having 105 acres of government land in the southwest quarter. With him went his wife, Sarah, and Rufus and William, Jr., a judge and member of the Board of Education.

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 left his farm, William built a house on it, and boarded a hired hand until he was 21.

BY 1831 Rufus had retired from farming and was living with his newly-wedded wife, Mrs. Adelaide North from Pontiac, in Hunter's house on the southeast corner of 15th and Merritt, a house which stood until after the big fire of 1883.

Rufus Hunter died in February, 1861, at the age of 73. The will was probated at the Probate Court of Wayne County in 1863.

Rufus, the youngest of the three Hunter brothers, was the third Hunter family on the west side of what is now Woodward Avenue. Pictured as it looked in 1841, the house is now occupied by Mrs. Alice N. White, widow of Kirby White. It is located at 360 W. Bloomfield.

Youngest Hunter Brother

An Unsung Pioneer

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An Unsung Pioneer

Captain Bigelow Fought with Gen. George Custer

John Allen Bigelow was a young man when he enlisted with the Northern forces in the Civil War. His war life was dangerous and eventful but he emerged from it with a medal of honor and the rank of captain. He was also a decorated officer in the Spanish-American War.

During his first enlistment, he was wounded in the Battle of Gettysburg and in the Battle of the Wilderness. He later served as an aide to General George Custer and as a member of the 1st Volunteer Cavalry Regiment.

In 1865, Bigelow lost his left arm and was discharged from the army. In 1870, he married Miss Sarah Knight and they moved to Detroit, where he practiced law.

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 with distinction and was awarded the rank of major in the Spanish-American War.

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