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Homer, Lockport always close

This is the latest in a series on the history of Lockport by John Lamb. Lamb, a professor of history at Lewis University, is president of the Illinois Canal Society. He is active in the Will County Historical Society and the Lockport Historical Preservation Council.

Lockport and Homer Townships have always been closely connected. The two townships were once linked together under the general name of Yankee Settlement. That name came about in this way: the area was originally settled by people from Indiana about 1830. This group was soon overwhelmed by a large influx of settlers from New England, New York and Ohio. The entire area of Homer and Lockport Townships east of the Des Plaines River went under the name of Yankee Settlement because of this.

When news of the Black Hawk War hit the area in 1832, the first thought of the settlers was to take refuge at Fort Dearborn in Chicago. But they had hardly arrived in Chicago when they decided, at the suggestion of Armstead Runyon, to go back to Yankee Settlement and build their own fortifications. Fort Sisson was built on Holder Sisson's property and was actually little more than a blockhouse. The fort was the headquarters and garrison of Sisson's company. The attack from the Indians never came, and Yankee Settlement's first and only military operation came when the company went to reconnoiter the

scene of a massacre that took place in La Salle County. And today nothing remains of that early symbol of pioneer fortitude, Fort Sisson.

After the Black Hawk War, settlers flooded into Yankee Settlement. In 1836 Will County was separated from Cook County, and Yankee Settlement was broken up. The larger part became Homer Township, and the settlement at Lockport became part of Lockport Township. Homer was named for Homer County in New York, the home of one of Yankee Settlement's county officials.

Despite the rush of settlers into Homer, there were only two towns established there. Both had post offices in the 19th century.

The more important was Hadley, which was named after Hadley, Mass. It was a little larger than Gooding's Grove. That hamlet was named after James Gooding, who came from New York with his family in 1832. The most famous of the Gooding brood was William, who grew up to be the engineer responsible for building the Illinois and Michigan Canal. William Gooding was also said to be responsible for planting the first orchard in the county. He wrote articles for the *Prairie Farmer* before becoming completely involved in the construction of the canal. In that journal he wrote on such topics as types of fencing other than timber that settlers could use on the prairie. In early Yankee

Settlement, timber was as rare as hen's teeth.

Both Hadley and Gooding's Grove shrunk to crossroads settlements; their promise was denied by the fact that no railroads were built through Homer Township. So, Lockport remained the capital of Yankee Settlement, even though it was outside the township boundaries.

Homer may not have developed any towns, but her importance in the history of the county rests upon the number of important figures that settled there. Of the early settlers, the most important was John Lane, because of his contribution to the development of farming on the prairie. Lane developed the steel plow that enabled the early settlers to effectively break the rich soil on the Illinois prairie. He had come west with several families who were to settle in Homer in 1833. These pioneers came together by ship from Buffalo to Chicago. From Chicago, they went overland along the Des Plaines River. They crossed the river at Lockport at what was called Butterfield's Ford.

It took two days to get from Chicago to Homer. Other settlers came west overland directly. That trip from the east took four weeks to reach Yankee Settlement. But whether by land or water, those that came to Homer found the soil to be extremely fertile. The prairie there was regarded as the most beautiful in Will County. How-

ever, the prairie did not last long; it was soon settled and plowed under to provide the rich farm land that made the township prosper.

After 1840 a new group arrived at Yankee Settlement. These were wealthy Scottish and English families who bought out many of the early Hoosier settlers. The result was a number of very prosperous farms in the township.

There was also some manufacturing. John Lane was making his inestimable steel prairie plow until his death in 1857. A saw mill was built on Spring Creek in 1838 or 1839. Charles M. Gray manufactured such early hand-operated farm implements as grain cradles and fanning mills. This sort of equipment would later be replaced

by reapers, thrashers and mowers. Charles Gray moved to Chicago, where he held an important position with the Michigan Southern Railroad. He also became mayor of Chicago.

Even though Yankee Settlement was not populous, it produced some eminent figures in the early history of Illinois.