



Olmsted 200

Bicentennial Notes about Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township

Issue 1

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Olmsted – Where Corn Counts in Cuyahoga County

The tradition of giving names to anniversaries is said to go back at least as far as the Holy Roman Empire, when a husband would give his wife a silver wreath on their 25th anniversary and a gold wreath on their 50th anniversary, thus establishing the traditions of the silver and golden anniversaries. In the 20th century, other anniversaries received similar designations mainly to guide gift-giving.

When a nation, state or community reaches the notable age of 200 years, it's called a bicentennial. But in the case of Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township, it also could be called the "bicolorntennial," because the way the communities date their founding makes every anniversary a corn anniversary (perhaps "corniversary").

Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township are remarkable communities. They share a highly rated school system, some of the best attributes of small-town, suburban life and historical ties exemplified by well-preserved buildings, parks and even rocks and stones.



The way they measure that history makes them even more remarkable. It's well known that both the township and the city date their founding to 1814. They proclaim it on signs at the city's border, in front of public buildings and elsewhere.

The identity of the person or persons who decided that the two Olmsteds were founded in 1814 seems to have been lost to

history. However, the decision was made sometime before 1964, when the communities celebrated their 150th anniversary. In honor of that sesquicentennial celebration, Bernice Offenberg published her history book, *Over the Years in Olmsted, Township 6, Range 15* (using the original designation for Olmsted Township). In regard to why 1814 was considered Olmsted's founding year, she said little except for one sentence at the end of a paragraph about James Geer and his family: "In 1814, the Geers became the first settlers in Township 6, Range 15, then called (Kingston), when they settled in the southeast section, which later became known as West View."

Two years later, in 1966, Walter F. Holzworth put out his more extensive book – *Township 6 Range 15: Historical Story Olmsted Township, Villages of Olmsted, North Olmsted, Westview* – which is a valuable source of much information about Olmsted's history. Over more than 300 pages, Holzworth packed a remarkable amount of details about the people and events that made Olmsted what it was up until shortly past the middle of the 20th century. On the subject of the settling of Olmsted, he wrote: "James Geer became the first settler in Olmsted or old Lenox Township in 1814, when he came to the West View area."



It should be noted that West View originally referred to more than just the area of the small village that was incorporated in 1927 and merged into Olmsted Falls in 1971. In the 1800s, West View was an unincorporated community that straddled the border between Columbia Township and the township later named Olmsted. The area around the old mill now known as Gibbs Butcher Block, which is on the northern edge of Columbia Township, was then considered part of West View.

In addition to the above statement, Holzworth wrote that Geer moved to northern Columbia Township in 1810. Then he added: "In 1814, he moved into Township 6, Range 15, where he built a log cabin and set up a rude tannery, using sap troughs for vats." That's the extent of what Holzworth shared about his knowledge of when Olmsted was first settled.

Neither he nor Offenberg explained the source of their information, but their agreement on 1814 as the year and the agreement of the city's and township's signs on the same year would seem to leave no doubt on when it happened. At least that would be the case, if an earlier account of Olmsted's history were not available.

Johnson had more to say.

The area's earliest published history is Crisfield Johnson's 1879 *History of Cuyahoga County, Ohio*, which offers a much more detailed description about what happened when Olmsted got its start.

"Township six and range fifteen...saw the first improvement made while war was still ranging along the not distant frontier," he wrote, making a reference to the War of 1812, which lasted until early 1815 even though the Treaty of Ghent to end it was signed late in 1814.

"In the year 1814 James Geer, then a resident of Columbia, which is now in Lorain county, but was at that time in Cuyahoga, cut out the underbrush and girdled the trees on a small piece of land in the southwest [sic] corner of the township, on what has since been known as the Browning farm."

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Johnson made an error in that second sentence when he referred to the piece of land being in the "southwest corner" of the township. It actually was in the southeastern corner of the township. Perhaps because he was writing about a community in southwestern Cuyahoga County or because it was in the area known as West View, he

overlooked that error in the editing process. The southwestern portion of the township actually was swampy until it was drained. Holzworth noted that old township records included many pages of discussions about drainage.

Johnson made a more serious error than that. He mistakenly put an "a" in "Olmsted." He likely bears much responsibility for the erroneous story that many people, including Holzworth, repeated for decades that the family whose name the township – and eventually Olmsted Falls and North Olmsted – adopted, was "Olmstead" and that the spelling was changed at some unspecified time. But the family's name always was "Olmsted" and so was the name of the communities that acquired it, even though people like Johnson and Holzworth often misspelled it. This was such a notable error that Bruce Banks and I devoted an entire chapter of our 2010 book, *The Olmsted Story: A Brief History of Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township*, to it. Please see that book if you want to learn more about the errant "a" in Olmsted.

Despite those errors, Johnson's history offers so many specific details about when Olmsted was settled that it is hard to dismiss. In addition to the excerpts quoted earlier that stated plainly that Geer still was a resident of Columbia Township in 1814 when he

planted some corn across the border, Johnson went on to establish that neither Geer nor anyone else lived in the township later named Olmsted until 1815.

“The next spring, after the declaration of peace, Mr. Geer put up a small log house at the place first mentioned, and moved thither with his family, becoming the first permanent resident of the present township of Olmstead [sic],” Johnson wrote. Again, he clearly

established 1815 as the year Geer and his family became Olmsted’s first settlers by placing their move not only during the “next spring” after Geer planted corn in 1814 but also by saying it was “after the declaration of peace.” Of course, that peace was the Treaty of Ghent, which was signed in Europe late in December 1814 to end the War of 1812, although the treaty did not reach the United States until early in 1815.

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For anyone who might question how Johnson learned all of those details in the 1870s, more than six decades after the Geers moved into the township, he revealed in the next sentences that his source was an eyewitness to those events: “His son, Calvin Geer, was then a boy of seven, and is now the earliest surviving resident of the township. Wild beasts swarmed all around, and often appeared in the edge of the little clearing. One of young Calvin’s oldest recollections is regarding the slaughter by his father of a bear which showed himself one Sunday evening, soon after their arrival, on the bank of Rocky river, not far from their cabin. Mr. Geer’s first shot broke the animal’s back, but such was his size and vitality that it took three more balls to kill him.”

Thus, Johnson not only stated repeatedly in different ways that the Geers became Olmsted’s first settlers in 1815 – not 1814 – but he also established that he got his information directly from someone who was present when it happened – Calvin Geer. That’s certainly a much stronger case for marking the beginning of settlement in Olmsted as 1815 than the general statements provided by Offenberg and Holzworth in favor of 1814 without the citation of any sources.

If there were still any doubt about which year Johnson meant to say was the year Olmsted was settled, his next paragraph begins: “The same year, 1815, Elijah Stearns and his son, David Johnson Stearns, came to Kingston, as Olmstead [sic] was then called, to select land for future settlement.”

(If you have any questions about the above information, look it up yourself. The Olmsted Falls library has a copy of Johnson’s *History of Cuyahoga County, Ohio*. The excerpts quoted above can be found on page 484.)

The designation is a matter of definition.

So does that mean that Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township are wrong in asserting that they were founded in 1814? Well, that depends on how you interpret the meaning of “found.” *Webster’s Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary* (1972), offers these definitions – “1: to take the first steps in building 2: to set or ground on something solid: BASE 3: to establish (as an institution) often with provision for future maintenance.” *Webster’s New World Dictionary: Third Collegiate Edition* (1994) provides these similar definitions – “to begin to build or organize; bring into being; establish [to *found* a college].”

Perhaps it could be argued that James Geer’s planting of a meager corn crop in the spring of 1814 was the founding of the Olmsted community, but that seems to depend on a flimsy interpretation of the above definitions. If Geer had done only a little farming in Olmsted while remaining a resident of Columbia Township, would anyone consider what he did in 1814 to be the start of Olmsted? Whether officials of Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township many years ago considered either the definition of “found” or Johnson’s history in deciding that 1814 was the year of Olmsted’s founding is unknown but unlikely. However, if the trustees of the township and the council members of the city want to continue to consider 1814 as the “official” year of Olmsted’s founding, that is something they, as “officials,” can do.

Nevertheless, for the sake of maintaining an accurate historical record, it would be better to say that Olmsted was first farmed in 1814 and first settled in 1815. And if Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township want to celebrate their bicentennial in 2014, they certainly can do that. But it would be most appropriate if they included corn in their celebration. Perhaps they could hold a corn festival.

Then there would be no reason for bicentennial celebrations to be limited to just one year. After celebrating in 2014 the “bicolornennial,” the 200th anniversary of Olmsted’s first corn crop, the communities could celebrate the 200th anniversary of the settling of Olmsted in 2015. That would make the Olmsted communities all the more remarkable, because how many other communities get to spend two years celebrating a bicentennial?

Down by the Old Mill Stream

Among the many attractions of David Fortier River Park in Olmsted Falls are the rocks and stones that tell portions of Olmsted’s history. They include not just the round grindstones and square blocks of sandstone left over from the late 19th century quarries



that operated there, but also the chiseled indications of the mills that used water power for sawing or grinding. But some of those signs require a trained eye to recognize them.



Good examples can be found near the mouth of Plum Creek just before it flows into the west branch of Rocky River. That's where Lemuel Hoadley, the builder of previous mills in the area, and John Barnum, his son-in-law, built a sawmill in 1832. More than 180 years later, you might not expect to find any remaining signs of that mill, but look closely.

On the side of Inscription Rock beside the creek is a straight, diagonal groove. That could be where Hoadley and Barnum anchored wooden planks to dam the creek and divert its water to flow through their mill. Square holes and other cutouts in the rocky creek bed also seem to show where the dam was anchored.

Nearby on the other side of the creek is a hand-chiseled channel that appears to have been a sluice for the mill's redirected water. The channel gets filled up easily with leaves, dirt and other debris, so it can be harder to spot at some times than others. Observers should make sure to notice the chisel marks left on the sides of the sluice. Similar chisel marks can be found on stones throughout the park and elsewhere in Olmsted. They remind us it took a lot of hard work to carve the features many park visitors take for granted. These things are easy for the casual observer to miss, but if you know what to look for and realize what you are looking at, they can make a trip to the park much more interesting.

Credit for figuring out what the diagonal groove on Inscription Rock and the chiseled channel represent goes to Bruce Banks, who has spent decades investigating Olmsted's history and revealing some of its mysteries.



News from the Past

History books are good sources for learning about what happened many years ago, but it's also interesting to read contemporary accounts of what life was like in the past. For example, the *Berea Enterprise* ran these items from its Olmsted Falls correspondent in April 1913:

- “Judging by the number of Olmsted Falls teeth that are being repaired in Cleveland every week, a good dentist would do a thriving business here.”
- “Village authorities pay no attention to the rowdies who break bottles on the brick paved streets; this is a misdemeanor of nightly occurrence. I should worry.”
- “The cleaning-up of back and front yards, agitated for weeks in the Enterprise, is progressing nicely, but some of the most offensive and unsightly heaps of junk haven’t been touched. Good citizenship demands that everyone help to make the village look as presentable as possible.”
- “A well-drilling rig was driven down Main-st., and Columbia-ave., Wednesday, with an absolute disregard for overhead wires. Several telephone wires were torn loose and it is said that a heavy cable carrying Lake Shore wires was broken.”
- “G.W. Kyle is having a gas well drilled on his place on Main-st., and a small flow of surface gas that was struck and fired about 10:30 Saturday night, combined with a stump-blasting explosion nearby at about the same time, alarmed many residents into thinking that an explosion had started a fire.”
- “Poles are up for the electric lighting installation, and some wires are strung. It looks now as though the village would have its work ready before the G.E. Milligan Co. is in shape to furnish current.”

Those items offer a snapshot of what life in Olmsted Falls was like a century ago. It's interesting to note that the village was just getting hooked up for electricity. It was coming from the George E. Milligan Co., which had a power plant in Elyria. In 1913, the company was extending its lines along Bagley (then called Dutch), Usher and West roads. As the item above indicates, Olmsted Falls was so eager to get electricity that the village put up poles and wires before Milligan could extend its lines that far. To accommodate the new service, the village also put up a transformer plant at the corner of Dutch and Usher roads.

In addition, it is interesting to note that gas wells still were being drilled in Olmsted Falls in 1913. The area had a brief spurt of oil drilling in the 1870s. Gas drilling began in the West View area in the 1880s and hit its height around Olmsted in the 1890s.

Still to Come

In future issues, we will consider the Olmsted Falls depot, including how it came to be built and how it ended up in its current location after starting out in a different spot.

We also will share the reminiscences of a longtime resident of Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township with information on life at the depot and the greenhouse industry.

Is there something about Olmsted's history that you would like to know more about? If so, let me know and I'll do my best to come up with the information from the archives I have acquired over many years or at least throw the question open to readers for their contributions. As Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township approach their bicentennial (whenever they celebrate it), this is a perfect time to explore their shared history.

Written contributions, as well as comments and questions about items in this newsletter, will be considered for publication. Send any correspondence by email to: wallacestar@hotmail.com. I hope you have enjoyed this first issue.

*Olmsted 200 is written, researched and edited by Jim Wallace, who is solely responsible for its content. He is co-author (with Bruce Banks) of **The Olmsted Story: A Brief History of Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township**, published in 2010 by The History Press of Charleston, S.C. **The Olmsted Story** is available at Clementine's Victorian Restaurant at Grand Pacific Junction and through online booksellers.*

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