

Frenchmen Gave Black River Its Name

An inquiry in a recent issue of the Banner Journal regarding the naming of Black River Falls and description of the falls had led to considerable research by several Jackson County Historical society members.

French explorers in 1659-60 traversed the river and named it “La Riviere Noire”, meaning “The Black River.” On Franquelin’s map of 1688, he has the Black River correctly placed and named. The dark color of the river caused by tannic acid from drainage over areas containing oak and tamarack trees and sphagnum moss. The Indian name for the River is “Neosheprah” meaning “Dark River” according to Frances Perry and Bernard Eagle.

One of the earliest recorded accounts of life in the Black River Valley is found in a diary kept by Willard Keyes. Keyes and a party from Prairie du Chien arrived on the Black River in January of 1819, and arrived at “Black River Falls”, on January 16. His entry on January 31, 1819 states: “I judge the river (at the falls) descends 20 rods, 25-30 feet. Another early description of the falls at Black River Falls is found in the works of Increase Allen Lapham, (an early Wisconsin scientist), “Wisconsin – It’s Geography and Topography” published in 1846. He stated, “The water dropped over the rocks in a fall of 22 feet in a distance of 100 yards.”

The above two descriptions locate the falls at the present site of the eight-gate power dam.

A writer in the May 5, 1885 issue of the Badger State Banner commented: “Black River Falls, has never made any pretensions as a summer resort yet it can undoubtedly present as great attractions as some villages that do make considerable claims like this. “Pretty scenery is no rarity in Wisconsin and this place is not without its share.”

“The rapids from which our city takes its name cannot by any flight of the imagination be compared to Niagara or Yosemite, but they are not lacking in impressiveness and would be considered a fortunate by your Wisconsin watering places.” “During high water, the flood pours over and past the rugged and angular rocks, gurgles and bubbles and swirls and eddies and seethes and foams and rushes and roars, angrily, madly, tumultuously, et cetera, in quite the orthodox manner.”

“The interest in the spectacle is of course much increased when the river is filled with logs, whose antics when plunging wildly over the falls are sufficiently striking to hold the attention of even old residents, while the chances of a jam will attract a large crowd at any time.”

There have been four types of dams at the falls. The first were brush dams, then log dams and, in 1908, the first concrete rolling dam, then the first to have the gates was built in 1912. On the early dams, an opening was left where logs and boats could go through, only the most experienced and venturesome log drivers and bateau operators “ran the rapids” as it required considerable skill and nerve.

After the main drive had passed, “clean up” crews had to come back to remove the logs from the rocks and skid them into the main channel. Many of the logs became hung up on the rocks and were cumbersome nuisance to the log drivers. The rocks had been dynamited extensively to furnish fill or for various projects along the river and down river. The gentle boulders now seen below the dam were much larger in the early days.

Black River Falls

Early History of Black River Falls

The earliest accounts of settlement on the Black River date back beyond the memory of the oldest inhabitants who left any historical records. Legend asserts French and Spanish explorers traveled to the Black River in the 1600's & 1700's. Indians controlled the land here until 1838, when they ceded it to the United States Government.

A fur traders post was located in Black River Falls at least by 1795. John Blair, one of the traders here, attained the advanced age of 111 when he died at his home here in May 1868. He was one of the older persons to have lived in Wisconsin.

The finest stand of white pine in Wisconsin was located along the Black River. The earliest record of attempt to log this timber is related in a diary kept by one of the loggers, Willard Keyes, who came with Constant Andrew's expedition in 1819. Keys implied others were logging here that year and the previous year.

The first farm began in 1839 near Melrose by Robert Douglas. Jacob Spaulding started the second farm in Jackson County in 1849. It was located just west of Black River Falls near the present Senior High School.

Black River Falls has been permanently settled since August 1839 when an expedition of 20 men, including Jacob Spaulding, came here to log. Spaulding is credited with being the founder of Black River Falls. The crew built a sawmill at the mouth of Town Creek. This property was sold to Mormons who improved and operated the mill property until their leader, Joseph Smith, was killed in 1844. Spaulding repurchased the property at that time.

In 1849, Jacob Spaulding, with two others, was commissioned to lay out a state road from Prairie Du Chien to Hudson, designated to go through Black River Falls and Eau Claire. This was later called the "Chippewa Overland Stage Route." For a number of years, William T. Price, who also owned the state line from La Crosse to Black River Falls, owned the stage line. He served in the Congress, as did two others from Black River Falls, Merlin Hull and Lester Johnson.

A Post office was established here in 1850, mail arriving by stage, via Monceville in Trempealeau County. Steamboats were the mode of transportation on the Mississippi and stagecoaches met the boats to deliver and receive freight for Jackson County.

Jackson County was established in 1853 and Black River Falls was designated the County Seat. Jackson had been a part of Crawford and La Crosse Counties. Black River Falls was incorporated as a village in 1866 and then became a city in 1883.

Iron mining was first attempted in 1855-56. Transportation was costly and after several disastrous failures, mining was abandoned. Again in 1883-92, mining of ore at Furnace Mound was semi-successful. The taconite plant was at Iron Mound, seven miles east of the city, and was one of the major employers of the County until 1992. Now it has been redeveloped as "Wazee Lake."

The West Wisconsin Railroad reached the area in December 1868. This railroad was later sold to the Chicago & North Western. The Green Bay and Western Railroad also served Jackson County and was built through the county in 1873-74.

On October 6, 1911, a huge flood destroyed the Black River Falls business area. Over 42 acres of land and 80 stone, brick and wooden buildings washed away. The business area was rebuilt on the old site.