

## Dickson Cemetery

By Roger Ruthhart

There are many places you can go in the Black Hawk State Historic Site for quiet reflection, but nowhere are you less likely to be disturbed by the neighbors than at the Dickson Cemetery. It is the burial site of the region's earliest pioneers; thus it is also called the Pioneer Cemetery.

In 1828 Rinah Wells settled among the Indians in a cabin the south side of the Rock River, across from the Sauk village of Saukenuk, which the Sauk were forced to leave in 1831. Mr. Wells died in 1852 and is buried in the Dickson Cemetery along with several other family members. In 1829, Joshua Vandruff arrived and established his home along the river before moving in 1830 to the island which bears his name in the Rock River between present-day Rock Island and Milan.

But perhaps the early pioneer who most left his mark on the area was William Dickson. He was born in New York in 1783 and at a young age moved with his family to Pennsylvania. In the Spring of 1834, he visited this region on horseback, returning home in the fall.

In 1836 he returned and in 1837 brought his family here, residing at the former site of Saukenuk. Dickson also donated two acres of land in what is now the northwest portion of the Black Hawk State Historic Site, to be used as a public burial ground. It was the first non-native cemetery in Rock Island County and many of the area's earliest settlers were buried there.

Dickson sold his land, including the cemetery, to David B. Sears and moved to what is now Milan, according to the "1908 History of Rock Island County." In 1843 Dickson laid out the town of Camden across the Rock River from the former Sauk village. In 1848 it became Camden Mills and was then changed to Milan in 1870 after being incorporated as a village in 1865.

Sears deeded the cemetery to Rock Island County in 1908. It was later used as a pauper's cemetery with some bodies reportedly buried on top of each other. In 1942 it was deeded to the state of Illinois and became part of the Black Hawk State Historic Site.

The most recent burial was that of a famous murderer, John Long, in 1978. According to a 1998 Rock Island Argus story, Long was found guilty of the July 4, 1845 murder of Col. George Davenport on Arsenal Island. According to the story, Long's remains were moved from place to place – often on display -- in the years following his hanging in October 1845. His bones were displayed in the Black Hawk Park museum until about 1975. Plans to bury the skeleton included one unexpected task, the story said, "getting the county coroner to issue a death certificate to prove Mr. Long was legally dead." He was finally buried at Dickson Cemetery in an unmarked grave Sept. 14, 1978.

Sadly, over the years Dickson Cemetery was neglected and vandalized and many headstones were stolen.

Dispatch-Argus writer Marlene Gantt detailed the abuse the historic cemetery endured when she reported on the theft of tombstones from the cemetery in 1985. "People were stealing tombstones, many of distinguished pioneer families such as Sears, Vandruff, Wells and others. They were being used as yard art and in one case to pave a patio in Davenport," she reported. According to one report some were later returned and dumped in a pile in the cemetery.

Despite the lack of care and respect the cemetery received over the years, there was somewhat of a happy ending. In July 2015, Boy Scout Noah Kelly began an effort to save what was left of the cemetery as part of his Eagle Scout project. He collected donations and organized volunteers to clear debris, weeds and brush from the cemetery

"Sixteen-year-old Noah Kelly, of Rock Island, loves history, and knew cleaning up one of the oldest cemeteries in the Quad-Cities was the perfect service project to help him earn the rank of Eagle Scout," Dispatch-Argus reporter Eric Timmons wrote at the time.

"The cleanup went really well; better than expected," Kelly said. "We were able to install a wooden split-rail fence that was approximately 200-feet-long on the west side of the cemetery. We were also able to clear the entirety of a big brush pile in the southwest corner of the cemetery."

Kelly also raised money to install a sign which tells the history of the cemetery and lists those who are buried there -- 55 (including the murderer Long). Burial information is available through the historic site.

Dickson Cemetery has been well maintained in the years since Kelly's cleanup. No longer is the area's original pioneer cemetery hidden in brush and brambles. While few graves are marked, and those that are have stones that have grown almost unreadable over the decades, today it provides the tranquil resting place that the heroic pioneer families who originally settled the Rock River valley deserve.