

History of Bethlehem, Coonsville, and of Lebbeus Thaddeus Coons

Dr. Lebbeus Thaddeus Coons (1811-1872) left a rich heritage in Mills County, southwestern Iowa, despite his short stay.

1 – He established the little town of Bethlehem in 1846, east across the Missouri River from what today is Plattsmouth, Nebraska. Bethlehem, renamed successively Sharpsburg, Junction City, and East Plattsmouth was the site of a Missouri River Ferry which ran almost continuously from 1850 until 1930. His little daughter, Patience, reportedly was the first child born in Iowa's Bethlehem, in 1846.

2 – L.T., as he was called by his great grandson, Daniel D. Coons from whom we get most of our information about the pioneer doctor, devoted his life to serving others. L.T. was born May 13, 1811 in Plymouth, New York and married Mary Ann Williamson in Spafford, New York in 1832. November 10 of that year L.T. and Mary Ann were baptized into The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS).

3 – Moving to Church headquarters in Kirtland, Ohio in 1833, L.T. was blessed "...to nurse and heal the sick." According to the practice of the early 1800s, L.T. studied medicine under the direction of a doctor until ready to serve as a physician. One of his famous patients was Brigham Young. He continued to serve as a doctor and as a surgeon almost 40 years before his death in Richfield, Utah at the age of 61.

4 – L.T. traveled far and wide by carriage tending to the sick in Mills County while it was yet a part of Pottawattamie County, and later when he helped organize Mills County.

Coons Called as Bishop of "Lower Area"

5 – He was called in January 1848 to serve as Bishop of the Church at Bethlehem and "...the lower area." The so-called lower area stretched south from Bethlehem 20 miles to include Plum Hollow, or today's Thurman, and other branches of the Church. Included in his church duties, before organization of the county, were those of a church court judge in which he was asked to hear "...all civil cases, cases of difference, debts, immoral conduct, etc."

6 – Six months later, L.T. moved seven miles east of Bethlehem to establish a new town called Coonsville. Like Bethlehem, Coonsville was carefully surveyed with streets running north and south, east and west. Main Street and Broadway, crossing each other in the center of town, were 80 feet wide. All other streets were 60 feet wide. Each block was 336 feet square and divided into only four lots. That was back in the days when gardening was for the dinner table.

7 – As his new town was being built, Bishop Coons was called to go on mission in the eastern States "...to raise means by donations and public contributions for the purpose of establishing schools in this frontier territory..." L.T. responded, taking his counselor, David Gamet, with him. They visited, among other places, Chicago, Illinois, Detroit, Michigan, and Syracuse, New York. Biographer Daniel D. Coons was unable to find a report on the amount of money, books, or other supplies raised by Coons and Gamet. But the 1850 Census of Pottawattamie County found many LDS schools in operation, with a healthy registration of students.

8 – A May 1849 letter, found in the Union Branch (Coonsville) records by researcher Daniel Coons, assigned Bishop Coons to visit, counsel, and preach to his own branch in Coonsville, Martindale's Branch in Bethlehem, Gardiner's Branch in Plum Hollow (now Thurman), and other branches in Dutch Hollow, Green Hollow, Dawsonburg, and Big Grove (now Oakland, Iowa).

9 – We wonder how this busy doctor found the time to volunteer help for others. Before Mills County was carved out of Pottawattamie County in 1851 and legally established, Church leaders (probably Orson Hyde and counselors in Kaneshville/Council Bluffs) called for volunteers to build houses for the poor. L.T. pledged and donated 10 days of labor on those houses.

Bishop and Doctor Elected Prosecuting Attorney

10 – L.T. was elected August 18, 1851 in Mills County's first election to serve as county prosecuting attorney. If he wasn't busy before, a gang of 30 or 40 men on horseback with guns rode into the new county, probably from near the Missouri state line, and kept him busy. They stopped land and property sales, forced courts to close, and jostled and threatened church members on the street.

11- Most good members of the Church simply moved out, since they planned to move on to Utah soon. L.T. sent his family on to Utah. He stayed in Coonsville until late 1853 or early 1854. Then he moved 55 miles north to Galland's Grove to be near two of his married children. L.T. also moved to Galland's Grove to be near Chany Williamson, brother of L.T.'s wife, Mary Ann. Finally he moved to the mouth of Soldier River on the Missouri. There he farmed and advertised in the *Magnolia Republican*:

***DR. L. T. COONS, Physician and Surgeon
may be found at his home near the Mouth
of the Soldier, when not away on county calls.***

12 – When members of his extended family moved to Utah in 1864, L.T. ended his long stay in Iowa and moved to Utah in 1865.

Having looked at an outline of the life of Lebbeus Thaddeus Coons, now let's look at how and why L.T. established the towns of Bethlehem and Coonsville. Also, let's look at how and why these towns were taken away from L.T.

L.T. and Mary Ann Coons, with their five children, arrived at Grand Encampment in early July 1846. They probably had more than one covered wagon and accompanying livestock. The livestock probably were herded along behind the covered wagons by one or more of the children, teenagers by that time. That was pleasant enough in good weather. However, Iowa gets plenty of rain, and its soft, rich soil turns quickly to mud.

Nonetheless, by July, Grand Encampment was breaking up. Something like 10,000 pioneers and their thousands of head of livestock had nearly used up the local wood and grass. The end of spring rains and accompanying hot weather reduced the natural springs of water to inadequate trickles. Wagon masters were busy scouting for new camping sites where they could winter their 50 or 60 families each at places with the magic mix of enough wood, water, and grass for all families. They would build homes, a church, possibly a mill, a tuition school, a wagon manufacturing shop, maybe a store, and some other facility to keep themselves busily productive during the winter.

Bethlehem Ferry Operated 80 Years

The Coons, Browns, Gamets, Roundys, Stewarts, and others may have stayed a few days at Grand Encampment while L.T. and one or two other fathers searched also for a good wintering location. L.T., a man of vision, selected a spot near the Missouri River opposite what now is Plattsmouth, Nebraska. That was far enough below where the mighty Platte or Nebraska River emptied into the Missouri from the west. Mills County historians claim a ferry was established there in 1846 when the L.T. Coons group moved in and established the town of Bethlehem. That may be, but the only documented record we have is of an LDS ferry established there in 1850, which operated from then until 1930.

Surveyor Andrew J. Stewart certified the following in 1850 at the Pottawattamie County courthouse, when it appeared outsiders might try to squat on the property:

- Main and Broadway Streets (crossing at right angles) were each 104 feet wide.
- Other streets were 60 feet wide.
- Each block was 396 feet square.
- The survey made at 30 degrees west of north, south 30 east.

Thus it is apparent the streets, named for presidents of the United States, ran from southeast to northwest and southwest to northeast. Chainmen for that careful platting were James Brown, Abram Hendrix, and Shadrack Roundy.

L.T. and Mary Ann's youngest, Patience, was born there July 27, 1846. That would have been very close to the time the site was surveyed and people were moving in. Primary occupations thereafter likely were farming and fishing. Almost 18 months later, L.T. would receive a call January 22, 1848 to serve as bishop of the "lower area" for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Other LDS towns had been established and L.T.'s area of responsibility extended up to 20 miles south and some undesignated distance to the east, probably another 20 miles. Not only did his church calling, but also his role as doctor and surgeon, caused him to travel far and wide in a carriage. Apparently in an attempt to shorten the distances he had to travel, L.T. and surveyors in early March 1848 went east from Bethlehem about seven miles and platted a new town later called Coonsville.

Again, threatened by outsiders wanting to take over, the Coonsville Plat was recorded in Pottawattamie County March 25, 1850, Book A, page 5, by surveyor A.J. Stewart. That document listed Ira K. Hillman and William Dally as chainmen in the 1848 survey. The registration listed Silas Hillman, Jonathan Crosley, Leb(b)eus Coons, David M. Gamett, Ira K. Hillman, and William Dally as proprietors of the town.

California Gold Rush Brought Prosperity

About 30 families moved into the new townsite of Coonsville. The town had been surveyed for 46 blocks. They were divided into lots of one fourth block each, so there was room for growth. And grow it did, especially after the start of the California Gold Rush in 1849. Farmers, wagon makers, mill operators, bakers, and shop keepers were able to sell everything they put up for sale to the apparently well-heeled Gold Rushers.

Non-LDS businessmen and residents soon moved into the suddenly prosperous LDS communities. These were good neighbors. When Pottawattamie County, which included all of southwestern Iowa, down to the Missouri border, collected taxes in 1849, people just north of the Missouri line refused to pay and threatened county tax assessors as well as tax collectors.

Missouri surveyors had taken a slice of Iowa and treated it as being within the State of Missouri. That was known and complained about by Wisconsin in the early 1830s when Iowa was a part of Wisconsin, but nothing was done about correcting the Missouri line. Finally, when Iowa became a state in December 1846, Missouri gave back that chunk of Iowa, including the Missourians who lived there. Those were the people who refused to pay tax to Pottawattamie County in 1849, a few months after Pottawattamie was organized in late 1848.

The transplanted Missourians claimed Pottawattamie was not legally organized. They also said they expected soon to be organized in a new county, and therefore would not pay.

The August 6, 1849 edition of *The Frontier Guardian*, edited and published by Orson Hyde, presiding authority of the Church for all LDS in Iowa, wrote in editorial:

There seems to be some in this County, who are not disposed to pay their taxes, and threaten violence to the officer if he attempts to assess or collect the revenue. Some of them urge, as a reason of their refusal, that our County is not legally organized, while others say that they intend to be attached to a new county that is to be formed and organized out of that portion of Missouri that has recently been ceded to Iowa with a portion of Pottawatamie County.

We cannot see how any man that is disposed to abide the law at all, can doubt the legality of our County organization. Would the auditor of State direct the officers in an unorganized County to collect the revenue? Would the Judicial power of the State give orders upon our commissioners for money to be paid over for State purposes, if we had no legal Commissioners? Would a Democratic Legislature try to disorganize a county that never was organized? (Democrats in the Iowa Legislature tried, in 1848, to erase the legal organization of Pottawattamie County, while at the same time declaring it had never been legally organized!) How would you proceed to kill a dead man? Would the Secretary of State cause the official seal of the county to be executed, and forward the same to the District Clerk if he did not recognize the legality of our organization?

It is contended by some in the South part of the County, that they expect to be attached to a new County, but it exhibits a very bad principle in those citizens residing on the Southern border of the County to refuse to pay taxes to officers of their own county; but it will be quite in season to pay taxes to that new County when they are legally separated from this County.

Boom Times Brought Outsiders

Pottawattamie County had been organized in September of 1848, so 1849 was the first year of its attempt to collect taxes throughout its length and breadth of the Pottawattamie Purchase, which included all or nearly all of southwestern Iowa. That same year of 1849 also was a year of great change in southwestern Iowa due to the transit of tens of thousands of Gold Rushers on their way to California. Figures published by *The Frontier Guardian* indicate some 10,000 California Gold Rushers crossed the Missouri River on the three ferries operating at or very near to Kaneshville, today's Council Bluffs. Great numbers also crossed the Missouri River on their way west at a number of ferries south of Council Bluffs. There were more than enough customers to buy up virtually every thing put up for sale in southwestern Iowa.

That marketing boom brought new businessmen and new residents into Pottawattamie County. It changed the political and social structure of southwestern Iowa towns. That change appears to have been an opening wedge for "don't tax me" former Missourians to put into practice what they had seen done very successfully in Missouri a decade earlier. By 1850 and 1851 gangs of 30 or 40 armed men on horseback started riding around what now is Mills County. They stopped land and property sales, closed courts and threatened residents. The original LDS settlers, planning to move on to Utah anyway, started flocking out of the county.

L.T. Coons sent his own family, except his wife Mary Ann, west to Utah. But, owning much of Glenwood, along with extended members of his family, L.T. stayed in town. When Mills County was organized in 1851, L.T. was elected prosecuting attorney. Is that an indication of the great confidence the voters of Mills County had in that overly busy bishop and doctor?

What did State of Iowa officials do when Coonsville came under attack by disgruntled residents from near the State of Missouri border? I wish I could tell you the State of Iowa officials did nothing. Instead, I have to tell you they conspired with the gangs of former Missourians. They faked records at the state capitol to pretend that Fremont, Page, and Taylor Counties had been established in 1847 – one year before the huge Pottawattamie County was organized by the Iowa Legislature in 1848 to include all of Pottawattamie Purchase in southwestern Iowa. Faking the establishment of Fremont, Page, and Taylor Counties for 1847, they thought, would cut the ground out from under the Mormon officials of Pottawattamie County who were trying to collect county taxes in the southern edge of Pottawattamie County.

Not only did Iowa officials overlook the contradiction of dates and boundaries. They surreptitiously changed the official records of Iowa, also overlooking that the Pottawattamie/Ottawa/Chippewa federated tribe had sold the Pottawattamie Purchase in 1846 on condition that they remain in control of the land in 1847 while their people were moving from southwestern Iowa to northeastern Kansas.

Conspiracy Known Even Decades Later

That this conspiracy was known at the time and decades later is to be seen in the wording of the *History of Mills County 1881*, saying in part:

"...In this year of 1851 many of them (the Mormons) cast their first (sic) and last ballot and aided (sic) in organizing the county (Mills). While the events we have narrated were transpiring, the gentile (non-LDS) population of the county had increased. Already, in the neighboring county of Fremont (sic), strenuous endeavors were being made to wrest from the Mormon population of that county the strength and prestige which superior numbers insured. It remained now to accomplish the same object here (in Mills County), and to this the gentile population addressed all its

energies. Opposition first found expression in denying the rights of suffrage, in disallowing the privilege of sitting on juries, and in open hostility to the judge of the district court, as has elsewhere been shown. Hence, these causes led to the final removal of the immediate followers of Brigham Young to Utah.”

The Democrats controlling Iowa government at the time were furious because the 1848 Mormon votes of southwestern Iowa had cost them a seat in the United States House of Representatives. They were even more furious at having been discovered to have falsely declared that the Mormon poll books “were stolen”, allowing them to certify that the Democrat William Thompson had, in fact, won the election and was thus seated in the Congress. Later, Thompson’s legal counselor, Judge Mason, was found in possession of the supposedly stolen poll books. That discovery allowed the Whig Party in Iowa to call into question the integrity of the Democrats then controlling the government of Iowa.

The officials of Iowa today likely are quite unaware of any cover-up or falsification of state records. Even so, some admission of tampering and a careful clean-up and re-publication of official records on the establishment and the organization of southwestern Iowa counties is to be expected.

Dr. Lebbeus Thaddeus Coons, despite all the violence and disruption of business, courts, and civil liberties, was able in 1853 to sell all of his holdings in Coonsville. L.T. sold the whole of it to Joseph Wellington Coolidge who had built the 1849 mill on Keg Creek in what today is Glenwood Lake Park. Coolidge then transferred half of those properties to Joseph L. Sharp who oversaw the renaming of Coonsville to Glenwood and renaming every street to the names of the new “founders” of Glenwood.

For some undisclosed reason, Sharp and Coolidge then each transferred one third of their L.T. Coons properties to two other men, Tyson and Nuttols, and the four of them became the town council.

Will historians every get behind the carefully constructed façade of Mills County and Glenwood? Not likely without government help.