



ARTICLE

Richardson's Point Additional History: Mormon Pioneer Trail

By Brad Klodt

Leaving Nauvoo in late February of 1846, approximately 500 wagons and 3000 people led by Brigham Young crossed the Mississippi River into Iowa and traveled into Van Buren County. Due to thawing conditions and rain, the roads became difficult to traverse and the main Mormon group stopped to make camp at a spot known as Richardson's Point. Located near the Van Buren/Davis County line, the Saints stopped and stayed in this region from March 7th to March 19th. During this time, three deaths occurred. Fifteen-month-old James Monroe Tanner, son of Sidney and Louisa Tanner, died March 17th from inflammation of the brain and was buried a quarter mile north of the main camp in a large oak timber.



Daffodils blooming on the grave of James Monroe Tanner who died at Richardson's Point in March 1846.

Photo/Jocelyn Rosdail

Edwin Little, age 30, had fallen into the Mississippi River when leaving Nauvoo while helping with a wagon of his uncle's, Brigham Young. The wagon had broken through the ice and Edwin was tossed into the river. Fighting what

had turned into pneumonia, Edwin was taken to a local house so he could receive proper care, but passed away March 18th. A crude wooden

casket was built and he was buried in the woods with the Tanner baby. Edwin left behind a wife, Harriet, and a young son, George. Harriet later married frontiersman Ephraim Hanks after she had reached Salt Lake City. President Young presided over both burials. A third death, Catherine Spencer, occurred outside of the camp and her body was returned to Nauvoo. The Saints broke camp on the 19th and continued their journey westward. Richardson's Point was used as a stopping spot for many as others fled Nauvoo.

One would have thought the two graves would have been forgotten due to the location of the grave placements deep within the timber, but they weren't. The local community seemed to have never forgotten them. As early as 1910-1915, it has been recorded that local school children would go to the graves with their teacher and pick Mayflowers to put on them. One of these children, Harold Brown, lived approximately a mile from the graves and made this his home until his death in the 1980s. Harold could always find the graves to show interested people. In 1963, Hazen Bonar and his brother tried unsuccessfully to find the graves for a pair of Mormon missionaries. The missionaries returned in 1965 and, again with the Bonar brothers, the graves were discovered. The Bonar's grandparents had homesteaded nearby properties in the 1840s and undoubtedly witnessed the large Mormon camps firsthand. In 1981, Wallace and Jane Maugar, with help from Wallace's cousin Ila Garrett and her husband Bud, began searching for the graves themselves. Wallace was actually Edwin Little's great-great-great grandson. The Maugars did not physically find the graves until 1983 and returned in 1985 with two funeral home markers and two headstones for the graves. The Maugars and Garretts should be given credit for their diligence. They carried bags of concrete, rock, water and tools into the woods by hand to accomplish their deed. Before, the only original visible markers were a granite headstone and limestone footstone on the Tanner grave.

Clarence Klodt purchased the 240-acre farm that the graves were located on in 1970 from the Bonar family, an unbelievable acquisition even by today's standards as some of the land was virgin prairie and a plow had never touched it. There was never a clear path to the graves. The only marker to the graves was a piece of tin stuck in an oak tree about 500 feet from the graves. As time went on, interest slowly picked up about the graves. After the Maugars had placed the new markers on the graves, that also helped get the word out. In 1996, the reenactment of the 150th anniversary of the Mormon Exodus took place. The wagon train made arrangements to camp at Richardson's Point, but heavy rains came and made the hay fields too wet to handle wagons, horses and support vehicles so a different location was found. That sparked Brad Klodt's, interest in the graves. He started cutting a pathway to the graves which made them easier to find. Move forward to 2012-2013 and Brad met Leon Wilkenson. Leon was the President of the Iowa Mormon Trail Association. With support from Leon, family friend David Short, Mark Fowler and the IMTA, an interpretive sign and a split-rail fence were installed around the graves. More brush was removed and donated rock was applied for a solid pathway. Old wooden Mormon Trail signs that had been put up for the 150th anniversary of the Exodus were restored. Even an original Mormon Trail signpost that the State of Iowa had put out in 1941 was restored and utilized. Three Richardson's Point metal markers were put along County Road J40 marking the entrance to the gravesites. With help from the LDS Church, a rededication took place in March 2014. Since that time, foot traffic has picked up considerably.

Historical Site Designation

In 2017, the Klodt family partnered with the National Park Service to have Richardson's Point designated as a historical site on the Mormon Pioneer National Historic Trail. Signage was placed at the trailhead to the gravesites along with a large site identification entrance sign off of County Road J40. The site was officially dedicated in October 2018 during the annual Van Buren County Scenic Drive Festival. Lee Kreutzer, Cultural Resources Specialist/Archaeologist with the National Park Service helped with the dedication.

Iowa State Archaeology Survey

In 2015, the University of Iowa Office of the State Archaeologist did a visual survey of part of the property used in March 1846 as the campground used by the Vanguard group. The homestead of Solomon Richardson was searched and the location of a large "L"-shaped cabin was discovered and flagged. Further investigating by a volunteer of the group discovered numerous building sites that had been used as dogtrotts along with several small cabins and what appeared to be a large barn. Further investigation has found Richardson's Point to have been used as a Way Station as late as 1853. Research is ongoing.

Additional Graves

Through different written documentation, it has been stated that there were additional burials at the Richardson's Point gravesites beyond the March 1846 burials. Matthew Bonar whose grandparents had homesteaded property next to the Richardson and Stewart families in 1840 told Mormon missionaries in 1963 that there were eight graves at the site. Local Van Buren County historian, the late Ralph Arnold, stated that old-timers in the area had spoken of at least 24 graves in the timber. Documentation has stated as high as 41 graves.

In the spring of 2016, the area surrounding Edwin Little's and James Tanner's graves was "witched" or "doused" for additional graves. Forty-one graves in five rows were found and marked. At this time, no names or times of death have been associated with these graves, but as Richardson's Point was used as a stopping point for the western-bound Mormons until the mid-1850s, speculation is that the additional

graves came from the Way Station. Research is ongoing.

Brad Klodt,"A question that always seems to get asked is why this spot is known as Richardson's Point. I don't know for sure if this will ever really be known, but I have found a few good reasons. As my dad bought smaller farms connected to his original farm, he started obtaining property abstracts. When I was asked to speak at the rededication in 2014, I started researching the history of the properties. From about six abstracts, the history started falling into place. In 1840, Solomon Richardson homesteaded 80 acres and built a large cabin. Soon, his brothers George and Shadrach, and other family members acquired adjoining properties. At the same time, the Stewart family, originally from Ohio, settled in Van Buren County. The two families became close and several siblings married. Benjamin F. Stewart married Polly Richardson and homesteaded 80 acres and Shadrach Richardson married Lavina Richardson. During this same time period, Salome Stewart Wells, sister to the Stewarts, and her husband, Otha, purchased property and built a home nearby. A.J. Stewart also settled on property joining his family's in the late 1830s. It was in 1842 that Polly Stewart was baptized into the Mormon Church. Her husband, Benjamin, followed in 1844. As other family members were baptized, a small church was formed. A.J. Stewart and his wife actually moved to Nauvoo in 1844(?) and Benjamin and Polly were planning to move there also when the Exodus started. More than likely, this is the reason the Vanguard group camped at Richardson's Point. Edwin Little was taken into the country to someone's home to attempt to nurse him back to health. A quote from a journal entry of Lorenzo D. Young on Wednesday, March 18, 1846, states the following:

“This morning Brother Wells came over to camp and told us that Edwin was A-diing. I harnessed my buggy as quick as possible, but, was to late, the poor fellow was gon.”

This could very well be Otha Wells and Edwin possibly died at the Otha and Salome Wells home now owned by Klodt family members.

Additional Information

- [Travel Iowa - Richardson's Point](#)
- [Villages of Van Buren](#)

Nearby Sites to Visit

- Troy Academy – 2.1 miles from Richardson's Point

Troy Academy was one of the first academies in Iowa when it was constructed in 1850.

- Milton Creamery, 202 IA Highway 2, Milton, IA, 52570

Home of award-winning cheeses and the always “squeaky” cheese curds, this Mennonite family-run business uses locally produced milk from small Amish dairies for all of their cheeses.

- Dutchman's Store, 103 Division Street, Cantril, IA, 52542

Mennonite-run, old-time general store specializing in bulk foods, local produce, baked goods, groceries, sewing supplies, and much more.

- Wickfield Pavilion, 17451 260th Street, Cantril, IA, 52542

Built in 1918 as a sales pavilion, this four-story Round Barn presents a wonderful photo op for barn enthusiasts.

- Van Buren County Courthouse, 406 Dodge Street, Keosauqua, IA, 52565

Built in 1843, this courthouse was listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Pitts Brass Band traveled from the Mormon Encampment at Richardson's Point in March 1846 to play for townspeople at the Courthouse.

