

THE STORY OF PETER M. KENT

From PIONEER HISTORY OF EATON COUNTY by Daniel Strange, published under the auspices of the Eaton County Pioneer Society, 1923.

I chance to know of two pioneers of Eaton County who made spectacular entrance into Michigan a few years before settling here. The first is that of Linus Potter, the father of the late Senator George N. Potter and his brothers. He reached Detroit when it was but a village in the wilderness; thence he walked thirty miles through the forest to establish a future home. His wife walked beside him while he carried their two little children, one upon his back and one in arms. They walked as far as seemed prudent into the wood where he left them sitting upon a log while he returned to take up the large bundle containing all their earthly goods. This he carried as far as the family or beyond, then he returned for them. Thus he walked the whole thirty miles three times over bearing his alternate burdens. He later came to Eaton County, cutting his road through miles of unbroken forest and settling where Potterville now is. His story belongs in the history of Benton where it is more fully told.

The other man of unusual experience was Peter M. Kent, one of the earliest pioneers of Oneida and later a most prominent citizen of Portland and then of Grand Ledge. His story belongs to Oneida, but that chapter is already prolix while this is brief; furthermore, his oldest son later became a pioneer of Sunfield and here the grandson were reared. This furnishes excuse, if not good reason, for giving his story here. Late in life he wrote an extended autobiography, remarkable alike in his unusual adventures and his marvelous memory in recalling them. From this "sketch," as he termed it, I am permitted to cull the following facts.

He was born in Pennsylvania in 1810, of Dutch parentage but very poor. At fifteen years of age he went for himself, working for a farmer at \$7.00 a month for six months, losing but two days and saving his earnings. Later he worked for \$10.00 a month and incidentally picked up the carpenter's trade. Then he worked three years at nominal wage and learned the millwright's trade. When twenty-one years old he had bought twenty-four acres of land and upon it had established his parents and their small children of whom he was thenceforth the main support.

He next started with a companion of like aspirations to traverse, on foot, the whole of western New York seeking desirable location for future life. The details are too prolix for these pages although very interesting. He finally bought eighty acres of land at \$3.00 an acre. Here he settled his parents who made some improvements when he sold the land for \$1,280, or \$16.00 an acre. This was a princely sum to start pioneer life in Michigan. He met, in New York State, James and Almeron Newmar, who told him they had purchased a mill site at the mouth of the Looking Glass River, and they engaged him to construct their mills. They took his trunk and tool chest to ship with their goods by water up the lakes and then the Grand River, while Kent followed on foot. He took boat from Cleveland to Toledo and thence on foot again.

His description of Michigan cities as he found them in 1836 is most interesting. He passed "through where Hudson now is" and reached Adrian "which then consisted of a tavern and one store." He then walked to Jonesville, "a little huddle", and thence to Coldwater "which was but a few houses about a mile from where the beautiful city of that name now is." Here he was offered two hundred forty acres, as choice looking land as he ever saw, for \$1,000. He offered \$950 but failed to get it. It is now within the city corporation. From there he walked to Marshall, "one store and a tavern". Here he had a supper so wretched that the landlord took no pay (after controversy) and offered a drink if he would say nothing.

no name.) Some advised that he go to the White Pigeon tence via Yankee Springs to Grand Rapids and up the river. Others said, no, go to Bellevue and take the Clinton Trail to Grand Rapids, Kent could believe neither of them. He knew the Newmans had gone through with two yoke of oxen and he did not think they had gone such a roundabout way. Another told him to return to Jackson and take the old Indian trail fifty miles through the forest to Scotts Tavern on the Looking Glass. This he did and found Jackson, "a small tavern, a store and two groceries" but he had much difficulty in learning of any trail through the north woods. One man knew of it— had been over it and said it ended just behind the tavern. He was told to follow it to Tanner's who would tell him all about it." Here he met a young man who thought he wanted to go through with him to Newman's, to get a steady job of work, to earn forty acres of land. It was now forty miles without a house or guide post, save the well worn Indian trail, deeped by centuries of travel. They followed but a few miles when the young man, disheartened, turned back. Kent was in no sense a woodsman and was too timid to venture alone. He went back to Davis and then hired a large powerful man named Turner to go through with him for "twenty shillings". Mrs. Davis sold them bread and a chunk of butter for their dinner as by sharp travel they could make it in a day. But Turner proved very heavy of foot. They slept in the woods when little more than half through, i.e., Turner slept, but mosquitoes kept Kent awake until dawn at 3:00 when they started on.

Their instructions were to follow the great trail to its end at the Cedar River near where Okemos now is and where there was then a deserted Indian village. Then follow the river down to a crossing and up the further bank to the Indian burying ground; then with their compass, steer directly north until they intercepted another trail leading to the Looking Glass. At the Cedar River, Turner balked and nearly fought to return but finally reluctantly followed on very slowly. It was a hot day and the only water they found was a pond in which they brushed the wigglers away and dipping their bread therein, ate it to quench thirst. Toward night, as a rain storm approached, they came to the Looking Glass and an Indian ferried them across.

"He pointed us the way to Scotts which was not very far down the river. Here we stayed over night with thirty others, land lookers, in his little block tavern. Here we found two men freighting down the river to Lyons. Five of us engaged passage with them to the mouth of the Looking Glass at fifty cents each. We constructed a rude raft to help support the frail boat. In this crazy contraption with much bailing we succeeded in reaching very near the mouth at Portland, but here the raft parted, the boat upset. The passengers, badly scared, shouted murder, but finally, clinging to willows by the shore, all lives were saved but the freight was lost." Their lusty calls brought the Newmans to their rescue. They were housed and dried and this perilous journey ended. Thus Peter Kent had walked the entire distance from Philadelphia to Grand Rapids except the space between Buffalo and Detroit. Much of this he walked over several times.

Quoting Kent: "Here my Michigan labor should begin but my tool chest, whipped by water, had not arrived. No work could be done without tools. We waited, then heard Newman's goods had been seen on the dock in Chicago. We asked a man going there to see that they were reshipped to Grand Rapids at once. Work must be begun soon or not at all that season. We went to Grand Rapids to search for the goods and there found my tool chest, which we reshipped to Lyons. We then returned on foot to Lyons, opened the chest and taking broad-axe, square and chalkline, walked to Portland and began work on the mill July 20, 1836, and it was raised on September 1st".

Almeron Newman and Kent then went to Detroit to select fixtures for a grist mill, of small run of stone, to add to the sawmill. Mr. Kent went on to York State on business but returned early in October to Detroit and at Farmington he met John and George

and began an acquaintance which continued while they lived. They walked together from Farmington to Scott's and beyond to S. B. Groger's in Eagle. They waded sloughs, twenty rods across and waist deep in water covered with a thin crust of ice. They became lost in the woods and sat upon the roots of trees all night. Groger was a professional land looker. He told them the best land in Michigan was just south across the river in Eaton County. And the next day he piloted a party of half a dozen over there, crossing at the "old ford" a mile below the ledges. Much land had been taken by speculators but he knew of a few choice tracts still open. He led them a zigzag course, following blazed trees of the government survey. He showed them sections 7 and 18, then went east to the center line and said if any would return that night it was time to start. They divided and some returned but my father, my uncle, George Strange, and Kent said they would look further. At the quarter post on the west side of section 34, night overtook them. Without blankets they could scarcely lie down in the light snow. They sat upon the roots of trees, told stories or walked about to keep warm. Speculators had been before them but of those who became settlers it is believed these were the first who ever set foot in Oneida. There was not a habitation nor roadway within ten miles of the land they selected.

The next morning (early in October, 1836) they went around section 34 and then determined their choice. Uncle George took the northwest quarter of section 7 and with my father they bought the south one-half of section 18 and the whole of section 34. Most of this section is still owned by the third generations of Stranges being of the very few tracts still in the family of the first purchaser.

Mr. Kent chose the one-half of section 27 and one-half of 28 thus giving him a square mile. They then returned to the "old ford" reaching there about 11 AM, after wading a slough waist deep and thinly encrusted with ice. Here they found Mr. Groger's son who met them with fresh biscuits, and in a canoe ferried them over. They started at once for the U. S. land office at Ionia to secure their land. They learned at Portland that the office was closed for a time. They all went to work for Newman until the office opened and soon after returned. Mr. Kent worked most of the winter on Newman's mill and at the same time hired a man to chop fifty acres on the northeast corner of his land in Oneida. The next summer he went east and brought his father's family to Portland but in March, 1838, he placed them in a log house built upon this land. This he called home but he continued to spend much time building mills, one at Stony Creek, ten miles below Portland, another at Lloyd's, another in Eagle and one at Wacousta. He geared a mill for Erastus Ingersoll in Delta and then helped Newman to build a modern large grist mill and Kent bought a half interest in it and ran it twelve years when again he removed to his farm in Oneida. In 1852, after being on the farm two years he, with his brother Francis, and Abram Hixson bought out the Grand Ledge milling properties but Peter remained upon his farm until 1861 when, having built a large house in Grand Ledge, he removed his family there, and spent the remainder of a serene old age, a foremost citizen, respected and esteemed by all.

End

So, how do you think Kent Street in Portland got its name? It is not easy to confirm but the temptation to speculate is great.

The descendants of Peter M. Kent were instrumental in starting and operating the Grand Ledge Clay Product Co. tile making industry.