

For Jack Jan

THE BRIDGE BETWEEN
LIBERTY AND ST. JOSEPH

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The great Thornton Family and its worthy daughters
Clay County Museum Association - October 22, 1970

Sheridan A. Logan

When Mr. Pharis invited Fred Hyde and me to Liberty this evening, he said I could pick my own subject. So I cast about for something that would tie together the rich history of Liberty and our twenty year younger heritage in St. Joseph. I hope you will agree that I have found the bridge in the remarkable "First Family" of the Thorntons of Liberty and the several worthy daughters who brought so much of their culture and background to "Our Town."

First, a brief chronology:

As far back as 1715 Louis XIV had granted exclusive trading privileges to Sir Anthony Crozat in that territory drained by the River St. Mary (sometimes known as the Mississippi), the River St. Jerome (sometimes known as the Wabash), and the River St. Philip (sometimes known as the Missouri).

THE LOUISIANA PURCHASE:

In 1803 Thomas Jefferson was presented with the remarkable opportunity to purchase this large area from Napoleon for \$15,000,000. At that time the principal settlements by the French were Ste. Genevieve and St. Louis. In 1804 Congress divided the vast area into two parts: The Territory of Orleans which is now the State of Louisiana; and everything north of that called the District of Louisiana. For administrative purposes this area was attached to the Territory of Indiana. The local government in 1804 consisted of four districts: Cape Girardeau, Ste. Genevieve, St. Louis, and St. Charles. That latter -- the District of St. Charles, included all the area between the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers -- where we are now. The population of the entire District of Louisiana was 10,000 and of the District of St. Charles 1,400 whites and 150 slaves.

Jefferson promptly organized the Lewis and Clark expedition to survey the New land. In May, 1804, the two leaders, with 28 men, started up the Missouri River to its headwaters, across the Continental Divide, and down the Columbia River to the Pacific Ocean. They then returned, getting back to St. Louis in September, 1806. In 1805 Congress changed the name of the District of Louisiana to the Territory of Louisiana and appointed a Territorial Governor.

By 1810 a colony of about 150 families, chiefly Kentuckians, had congregated in the region of what is now Howard County, near the present town of Franklin. The population of the Territory had reached about 20,000.

In 1812 Congress again changed the name of the Territory of Louisiana to the Territory of Missouri, and in 1813 William Clark (of the Lewis and Clark expedition) was appointed Territorial Governor. The first General Assembly was held in December, 1812, at the house of Joseph Robidoux, in St. Louis. Remember that name -- you will hear it again.

In 1816 Howard County was organized, with Franklin the County seat. The expansion of the population was rapid, the settlers of that time coming mostly from Kentucky, Virginia, Tennessee, and North Carolina. Many of them owned slaves, so naturally they brought them to their new homes. In 1818 Cooper County was organized, and in 1821 Boone County. The first steamboat to ascend the Missouri River as far as Franklin was in 1819, after a twelve day trip from St. Louis. The first newspaper west of St. Louis was the "Missouri Intelligencer" established at Franklin in 1819.

The rapid growth of population in Missouri Territory led to ambitions for Statehood. But this was not a simple matter. The settlers from the South had brought Negro slaves into the Territory, so the institution of slavery was already established. On the other hand there was a great abhorrence of the institution in much of the nation, and the feeling, steadily rising, that slavery should at least be confined to the areas where it was already in existence and by no means be allowed to extend further. Finally, the balance in Congress between the Free States and the Slave States was preserved by the admission in 1820 of Missouri as a Slave State and Maine as a Free State. The genius of Henry Clay solved the impasse by the "Missouri Compromise", whereby it was agreed that never again would slavery be permitted in any Territory north of the southern boundary of Missouri. Kansas, Nebraska, and the tragic War Between the States was just thirty years away.

So, Missouri became a State in 1821, and Alexander McNair was elected the first governor. In 1821, cut out of the vast area of Howard County, was established the County of Ray. In the next year, cut out of Ray, was established the County of Clay. So, in a two year period, the people living here in their log houses were citizens of three different counties.

The Western boundary of the State of Missouri was the political line north and south through the mouth of the Kansas River -- well known to us now as "State Line" road in Kansas City. The line extended on north clear to Iowa, thus creating a triangle about 100 miles North and South and 60 miles East and West at the top. The Missouri River, roughly, was the hypotenuse of this triangle, and this area was set aside for the Iowa, Sac, and Fox Indians.

This meant that the white settlers of all the Northwest part of Missouri were cut off from the nearest access to the Missouri River, and that such access had to go north and south through Liberty Landing. The land in the triangle was excellent, and coveted by the white men as much too good for the Indians. The pressure of population finally resulted in the purchase of the triangle by the United States Government from the Indians by treaties at Fort Leavenworth in 1836 -- "THE PLATTE PURCHASE" -- and the addition of that territory to the State of Missouri in 1837.

This provided a loophole in conflict with the "Missouri Compromise" by the addition of slave territory north of the forbidden line -- a development most compatible with the customs of the many settlers who came into the new area from their home states of Kentucky, Virginia, Tennessee, and North Carolina. Six counties were made out of the Platte Purchase -- Platte, directly west of Clay, Buchanan, Andrew, Nodaway, Holt, and Atchison. The town of Liberty was established in 1822; Weston in 1837; and St. Joseph in 1843.

Now -- what sort of a place was Liberty, the county seat of newly organized Clay County in 1822? Well, fortunately we have a contemporary answer to that very question. Mrs. Shubael Allen and her husband arrived in Clay County from Kentucky, in 1822. She later wrote:

"I found good Society in Clay County when I went there. There were a great many men of force of mind -- a few finely educated. Many of the ladies were from the best social circles of Kentucky, Virginia, Maryland, North Carolina, and elsewhere. In 1833 I doubt if there was a town of its size in the United States that had so many brilliant men and women in it as Liberty."

(I was curious about that name Shubael -- so I looked it up. If you don't know, this will interest you. Shubael comes from the Old Testament. He was a grandson of Moses.)

Mrs. Allen was a TRIGG, and she had a sister who also arrived in this area about two years before. That brings us to the great THORNTON FAMILY.

John Thornton was born in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, in 1786 and died in Clay County, Missouri, in 1847 at the age of 61. I have been told that he was of the same family as the Thornton who was the original architect of the United States Capitol in Washington, D. C.

When a child of seven years, in 1793, he was taken to Kentucky by his father, and educated in Law. In 1817, when he was 31, he came out to Old Franklin in Howard County. There, in the winter of 1818, he met Miss Elizabeth Clarke Trigg, daughter of General Stephen Trigg. General Trigg's father had served under General Washington as Major of Artillery at the siege of Yorktown and the surrender of Lord Cornwallis. He himself has been a Colonel of Volunteers in the War of 1812, and a few years on beyond this point in our story was to be appointed Major General of the Missouri Militia.

John Thornton and Elizabeth Trigg were married February 10, 1820. A few months later they moved to what was to become Clay County, and about five miles southwest of here he accumulated about 1,800 acres of land and built a comfortable log house -- two structures with a breezeway in between.

The first County Court of the newly organized Clay County convened in Liberty, February 11, 1822, and John Thornton was one of the three judges. At this time this was near the edge of white settlement in America. In 1823 Thornton built a log blockhouse on his land which was frequently occupied by the women and children during Indian alarms. General Trigg appointed his son-in-law, Thornton, a Colonel in the Missouri Militia and charged him with the responsibility for protecting the frontier from the Indians. It was Thornton's letters to President Monroe that brought Henry Leavenworth out to Liberty. After discussion, it was decided that the best place to establish a military installation was West of the Missouri River -- and that is how Fort Leavenworth came to be established.

From 1824 to 1830 Colonel Thornton was in command of the 28th Regiment of Missouri Militia under General Stephen Trigg, his father-in-law.

In 1829 he built a large Brick house one-half mile east of the original log house. That is "Western Farm", part of which is still standing, about five miles from here -- and of which Mr. Hyde will show you pictures.

Col. John Thornton was a striking figure of a man, a perfection of manly form, over six feet tall and admirably proportioned. George Bingham, Missouri's great artist, said on one occasion to his daughter:

"It has been thirty years since I painted Col. Thornton's portrait -- his face was so striking I could paint it today from memory."

- 1) Jane born 1820 married General Alexander W. Doniphan,
hero of the Mexican War
- 2) Caroline born 1823 married Capt. Oliver Perry Moss
- 3) Adeliza born 1824 married William Morton
- 4) Susan born 1826 married James H. Baldwin
- 5) Mary born 1829 married Robert Washington Donnell
- 6) Frances born 1833 married Col. John Doniphan
- 7) John C. Calhoun Thornton ("Coon")born 1834
- 8) Theodosia (named for Theodosia Burr, daughter of Aaron Burr)
born 1836 married Leonidas M. Lawson

Col. Thornton died in October, 1847, and the home "Western Farm" was sold, the widow moving into Liberty. She died in 1858 at the age of 57, and General Doniphan became the leader of the family.

Three of the Thornton daughters, Mrs. Donnell, Mrs. John Doniphan, and Mrs. Lawson, married men who were influential in the life of St. Joseph. After the father, perhaps the most influential of the sons-in-law was General Alexander W. Doniphan, a striking figure of a man, 6' 4" in height. Born 1808 in Maysville, Mason County, Kentucky, he was educated in law and very eloquent.

He moved to Lexington, Missouri, in 1830, and in 1833 came to Liberty. He joined the Missouri Militia and commanded the 1st Brigade against the Mormons at "Far West" in Caldwell County in 1838. He received an order from his superior officer, Major General Samuel D. Lucas, to shoot the surrendered Mormon leader, Joseph Smith, and the prisoners on the public square. His response was to send the following message to the General:

"It is cold blooded murder. I will not obey your order -- and my brigade will march to Liberty tomorrow morning at eight o'clock. If you execute these men I will hold you responsible before an earthly tribunal, so help me God."

In 1846 he was elected Colonel of the First Regiment of the Missouri Mounted Volunteers for the Mexican War and led a remarkable march over a 12 month period, winning several battles, and covering 3,600 miles on land and 2,000 by water.

He was elected to the Missouri Legislature in 1836, 1840, and 1854. The Legislature appointed him a delegate to the Peace Conference in Washington in 1861. While he was absent from the State, he was elected to a State Convention held at St. Louis to determine whether or not Missouri should secede. He opposed secession, but expressed concern for States Rights. He favored the State adopting a position of neutrality. This same stance he followed personally: The Governor handed him a Commission as Major General in the State Guard. He took no action for two weeks, then handed it back and went to St. Louis where he stayed until 1868. He then went to Richmond, Missouri, practiced law and was President of the Ray County Savings Bank. He died in Richmond in 1887, but claiming Liberty as his home, is buried in the cemetery here.

He was a true leader of men. Abraham Lincoln said, after meeting Doniphan at the Washington Conference in 1861:

"He is the only man I ever met, after hearing great things of him, who fully measured up to my expectations."

That was the husband of the oldest Thornton daughter, Jane. Her younger sister, Mary, had chosen another most remarkable man: Robert Washington Donnell.

He was born December 13, 1816, near Greensboro, North Carolina, descended from ancestors who came originally from the West Coast of Scotland. His grandfather was a Major in the Continental Army in the War of Independence and was wounded at the Battle of Guilford Court House, 1781. Robert attended

the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, but before he was twenty he moved to Missouri and opened a store in Clay County, near Liberty. There he met and married Mary Thornton, whose father, Col. John Thornton, had made the original suggestion of "Missouri" for the name of the State.

He moved into the Platte Purchase in 1838, at Rock House Prairie, before the town of Saint Joseph was incorporated. Coming on into the new town in the early 1840's he established the earliest dry goods business, the firm of Smith & Donnell. Selling out in 1848, he formed the firm of Donnell, Saxton & Duvall, which operated at the Southwest corner of Fourth and Felix Streets. In 1856 the business was sold to R. L. McDonald and in 1857 Donnell and Saxton organized a branch of the Bank of the State of Missouri, Donnell becoming President and Saxton Cashier. The Bank building still stands at the southeast corner of Fourth and Felix Streets.

Early in 1860, Donnell was one of the group of 21 St. Joseph business men who effectively induced Russell, Majors & Waddell to make Saint Joseph the eastern terminus of the Pony Express. When the War Between the States threatened in 1860-61, Donnell was elected to the Constitutional Convention called to consider the relations between the State of Missouri and the Federal Government.

In 1864 Donnell turned his attention to the Territory of Montana, establishing stores at Virginia City and Helena, and becoming associated with William A. Clark, later U. S. Senator, in the firm of Donnell & Clark. Their business at Deer Lodge became the First National Bank of Deer Lodge. In 1877 Donnell helped establish a bank at Butte, which later became the Bank of W. A. Clark & Brother.

In 1870 Donnell moved to New York City and organized the banking firm of Donnell, Lawson & Simpson. This firm became the New York correspondent of some 400 western banks and fiscal agent for the States of Kansas, Missouri, and Nebraska, as well as several other western states. For many years they were the largest dealers in gold and silver bullion, with a branch in London, England. The firm participated actively in the financing of numerous railway systems.

Robert W. Donnell retired from active business in 1884, and died at his home in New York City on January 4, 1892. Burial was in Mount Mora Cemetery, St. Joseph. His only child, a son, died in infancy. He was a Christian gentleman of great ability, integrity, charm, hospitality, courtesy, unselfishness and devotion to the interests of his friends.

Relatives have told me that the Donnell's were no blood relation of George Washington, but had had some contact with him and out of their admiration for the General gave his middle name to Robert Donnell.

Another Thornton daughter, Frances, married Col. John Doniphan, the nephew of the General. John was born in 1826, was only fifteen when his father died, worked as an apprentice printer in Maysville, Mason County, Kentucky. He studied law and went along on the Mexican expedition of his uncle in 1846. After the Mexican war he moved to Weston and practiced law. In 1862 he was elected Colonel of the 39th Missouri Militia and was on active service till the end of the War. After the Civil War -- about 1872 -- he moved to St. Joseph, and was elected attorney of the St. Joseph & Denver City Railroad, now the Grand Island. He was the first President of the Weston, Atchison, & St. Joseph Railroad. He was a member of the State Legislature, served in the State Senate four years, and later was elected judge of the Court of Common Pleas. After his death in 1901, Mrs. Doniphan remained in St. Joseph with her widowed sister, Mrs. Caroline Moss. Here is a letter which Mrs. Moss wrote from that home to her nephew in Columbia:

"St. Joseph,
August 24th, 1882

"Mr. James H. Moss,
Columbia, Mo.

"My dear Nephew,

"I send you by express today your dear Uncle Perry's watch, so long worn, and so much prized by him, and myself. He wore the watch in all the marches - privations - hardships, and glories, of that wonderful march known as "Doniphans Expedition", which started from Fort Leavenworth, the 26th day of June, 1846, thence to Santa Fe, to Chihuahua, from that point two thousand miles through an enemy's country, to General Taylor's camp, near Buena Vista, and from there to the Gulf of Mexico; where they embarked for New Orleans, and were there mustered out of the service of the United States, June, 1847, then home to Missouri three thousand five hundred miles by water, this watch gave the time: The time to march, the time to camp, in every hour of danger, of sadness, of toil, many times on the bare ground, with a rock for a pillow, the watch kept time; it spoke truthfully and surely that the days of hard marching and fighting, must end, and hope whispered, and in reunion at happy Lindenwood.

"In the hard fought battle of Sacramento, and the brilliant victory in which it culminated, where your Uncle Perry achieved undying fame, this watch moved forward at the same measured pace, as if after the terrible bloody battle, the agitated heart, the generous heart, the noble-feeling manly heart it covered, were just as free from excitement as if in our dear "Lindenwood Home" in Clay Co. Missouri.

"This watch has done good service in the farm in Clay Co., in the Bank, in Public Office, everywhere. May the watch be with you in the journey of life; and give you pleasure, as well as profit, in telling you when to work, when to rest.

"Take then the watch, my son, and emulate the example of your Uncle Perry, its owner, in all his truthness, integrity, affection and goodness: Never let the watch pass out of the "Moss family." Let one of the Name always wear it, and its history end with it, down the stream of time.

"God bless you! God bless you!
Your affectionate Aunt,
Caroline M. Moss."

The youngest Thornton daughter, Theodosia, was probably the most interesting. She was born in 1836 at "Western Farm", the Thornton brick home southwest of Liberty. She was married in Liberty, December, 1860, in the house to which her widowed mother had moved in 1847, to Leonidas M. Lawson, professor of Classics and English literature at William Jewell College. The ceremony was performed by Reverend William Thompson, the second President of William Jewell College. General Doniphan gave his sister-in-law in marriage and among the prominent guests was the Commander of Fort Leavenworth, Col. Philip St. George Cooke, and his daughter, Flora, who was then the wife of J. E. B. Stuart, later great Confederate cavalry officer. After the wedding the Lawsons moved to Weston where Mr. Lawson practiced law. In 1863 Mr. Donnell, the brother-in-law, reorganized the branch of the Bank of the State of Missouri in St. Joseph as the State National Bank, and brought Mr. Lawson into it.

As a southerner, Mr. Donnell, a prominent man in the predominantly southern city of St. Joseph, had a difficult time during the beginning of the Civil War. He was required to sign the Oath of Allegiance which originally contained the proviso that the signer would inform on his friends. Unable to do that Donnell was placed in jail in St. Joseph for several months until, as the result of widespread demand, President Lincoln modified the oath and eliminated the requirement to inform. Mr. Donnell then went to Montana, turning over responsibility for the Bank to Mr. Lawson, who brought it safely through the chaotic War years in St. Joseph. The building stands unchanged there today -- the oldest building continuously used for banking purposes in the United States west of the Mississippi River.

In 1870 Mr. and Mrs. Lawson went to live in New York, where he was a partner in the banking firm of Donnell, Lawson & Simpson. As mentioned

before, the firm was the largest dealer in gold and silver bullion in the world, with an office in London. In the early 1870's Mrs. Theodosia Thornton Lawson achieved the ultimate in social distinction for that time or this when she was presented at Court to Queen Victoria. In 1884 a Banking Panic in New York closed the principal depository of Donnell, Lawson & Simpson with about two million dollars of their funds. By great sacrifices of their personal fortunes all obligations of Donnell, Lawson & Simpson were met, but the agonies and efforts levied a heavy toll on the partners. Mr. Donnell died, a broken giant, in 1892, and is buried in his beloved home, St. Joseph. His monument in Mt. Mora Cemetery reads:

IN MEMORIAM

Robert Washington Donnell

Born in Greensboro, North Carolina	December 13, 1816
Died in New York City	January 4, 1892

A just man and perfect in his generation
Thoroughly furnished as to all good works
His moderation and wisdom, united to tenderness,
and sweet oblivion of self, were mingled with
love and courage in a soul that was devoted to
the service of God, his family, and his fellow
men. Henceforth there is laid up for him a
crown of righteousness.

Mr. Lawson died in 1907, and Mrs. Lawson returned to St. Joseph to live with her sister, Mrs. John Doniphan. The last years of her life were not affluent, and in great contrast to her expansive years. Fortunately, at the time she had the funds, she erected in your Liberty cemetery those beautiful monuments of red Scotch granite to her parents and family. She died in St. Joseph in 1935 at the age of 99, and was buried alongside her husband here in the Liberty Cemetery next to the beautiful Thornton monuments. But there has been no one to place even a marker for her.

A part of my information about Mrs. Lawson has come from a lady in St. Joseph who knew her well. After she died, this lady was able to secure from her sons many of her accumulated papers and letters. There was a large carton, containing volumes of her diaries, bound in red leather, imprinted with gold letters, covering her great years in New York and London. There was an invitation from Mrs. Vanderbilt to join them at the Metropolitan Opera in the Vanderbilt box. One time when my friend returned home from a trip she missed the carton of Mrs. Lawson's things. So she asked her Mother where they were. "Oh, I have been cleaning house and I couldn't stand those

around. So I threw them in the furnace." Those of you who cherish family and historic records should remember that story, and try to preserve your treasures.

So -- there is only a part of the record of one of the great pioneer families of Clay County and several of its worthy daughters who occupied leading places in our beloved St. Joseph.

Finally -- just a quick summary of the history of "Our Town" as the back drop for the Thornton sisters. The easiest way to remember it is to think that there have been four successive towns:

- 1) The River Town of Joseph Robidoux, 1843 to 1858
The days of the Steamboats and the covered wagons going west.
- 2) The Railroad Town of John Patee, 1859 to 1869
The Hannibal and St. Joseph Railroad
The Pony Express 1860-61 of Russell, Majors & Waddell
- 3) The Wholesale Town of Milton Tootle, 1870 to 1920
This was the Golden Age of great prosperity.
Great jobbing firms grew up supplying the West.
We had five great wholesale dry goods firms; Kansas City
-- a late comer -- had none.
Worth in Paris sent many fine gowns to the ladies of St.
Joseph. You can see some of them in our St. Joseph Museum
today.
We still live in our minds in the sunset glow of those
Great Days.
- 4) The Agri-Town
Trade center for the surrounding Agricultural Region.
There is no longer the National view -- looking outward.
This period started about 1920. How long will it last?
As a guess -- 1990

And what then? What will the FIFTH town be? Will it just be URBAN SPRAWL from Kansas City? We can only hope for the best!