

IMAGES

...THEN AND NOW

From the Indian Hill Historical Society



Buckingham Lodge-1861

John Cleves Symmes and the Miami Purchase

Born in 1742 on Long Island, NY, John Cleves Symmes was a clergyman's son. He became a schoolteacher, then was educated as a lawyer. He married Anna Tuthill, and the couple had three daughters. The Symmes family moved to Morristown, NJ in 1770 and resided at the family estate, Solitude.

Symmes was an avid supporter of the American Revolution, and in 1774 he was chairman of a local New Jersey Committee of Safety. In 1776 he was elected to the New Jersey legislature, and he was a state delegate to the Continental Congress. During the War for Independence, he was Colonel of the 3rd Regiment of the Sussex County militia. He saw action in numerous battles during the New York and New Jersey campaigns. Symmes also served on New Jersey's Supreme Court in 1777-1778.

While serving New Jersey as a member of the U.S. Congress, Symmes became interested in the western lands. He considered development of the Wabash River Valley in Indiana, but decided it was too remote. Instead he became enamored with the Miami country – based on the favorable reports of his friend and neighbor, Benjamin Stites. Symmes petitioned Congress for a million acres, and a contract was prepared in October, 1787 for a syndicate known as the Miami Company. The group's intentions were speculative. Under the contract, acreage would be conveyed after receipts of monies over a three year time period. The boundaries of the Miami Purchase were the Ohio River, the Great Miami River, the Little Miami River, and a line between Butler and Warren Counties about 25 miles north of the Ohio River (near Lebanon). The investors paid about 66 cents per acre.



Confident about the contract, Symmes moved rapidly to promote the Miami Purchase, advertising in New Jersey newspapers. Hyperbolic statements enticed pioneers to the wilderness of Ohio. Symmes embellished the descriptions of the acreage to develop it quickly so that funds could be acquired to make his next payment.

In 1788 the Symmes family moved west to establish a settlement in current day North Bend, Ohio – which meant that Symmes was one of the earliest to make a home in the newly opened land of promise. The same year John Symmes became one of three judges in the Northwest Territory, which encompassed Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Wisconsin, and part of Minnesota. He was qualified for this because of his experience on the high court of New Jersey. This was an important position and required him to take many long and arduous trips away from his home and family.

The population of the lands of the Miami Purchase grew rapidly. Optimistic by nature, Symmes had trouble because he brushed aside important details. Speedy rather than orderly settlement was his priority. Many mistakes were committed by Symmes' surveyors. Symmes sold land he did not actually own, and sold some land he did own more than once. He did not have an orderly system to record all transactions. His accounts were muddled. Symmes was unable to meet his obligations to the US Board of Treasury, so he ended up only acquiring about 311,000 acres. Some settlers who thought they held clear titles discovered they were squatters on public lands and had to repurchase their properties from the federal government. They then sued Symmes, who lacked funds to pay the court judgments, so his holdings were seized and sold to satisfy claims against him. At the end of his life, he was essentially reduced to poverty. Still he intended to pay his debts. In his final will, he instructed that his "few fragments of land" be sold to settle all demands against him.

In retrospect, Symmes had a huge impact on southwestern Ohio. Part of current day Indian Hill is in Symmes Township. Many early pioneers in the area settled here with deeds from Symmes himself. He spearheaded the development of the Miami Purchase by moving here very early. He encouraged the public to settle what then was the frontier of an infant nation. He was a political leader, businessman, and real estate entrepreneur with a dream. He played a large part in the settlement of an important and vital western community.