

Thomas Mitchell (1816-1894)

Thomas Mitchell is recognized as the first white settler in Polk County, Iowa. He was born in New Hampshire on March 3, 1816, and grew up on his family's farm. He was educated in the public schools of the time and moved west to the Mississippi Valley in 1839.

Mitchell first came to Polk County in 1844. He obtained a permit from the commanding officer of Fort Des Moines to make a land claim near Camp Creek. In exchange, he built a bridge over the Creek which was often impassible to wagons traveling from Keokuk to Fort Des Moines.

Mitchell built a double log cabin near a grove of wild crab apple trees (now known as Apple Grove) along the shores of Camp Creek. Mitchell's cabin became known as Apple Grove Inn and was a favorite stopping place for travelers and immigrants on their way west. He gained a reputation for being a friend to all including Native Americans in the area. In July 1845, a group of 300 Mormons on their pilgrimage from Nauvoo stopped at Mitchell's inn to rest. He distinguished himself by the kindness and hospitality he showed them. Mitchell's cabin was later a well-known station on the Underground Railroad.

In 1850 Thomas Mitchell founded the town of Mitchellville about a mile northwest of where is today. When the railroad arrived in 1867, Mitchell moved his home, and the town, to its present location closer to the railroad lines. He designed the city with wide streets and many beautiful trees. Mitchell also donated land for a cemetery and for the Mitchellville City Park.

In 1873, Mitchell donated \$500 to establish a seminary where young women were given the opportunity to obtain a high school education. The seminary later became the Iowa Industrial School for Girls. He is also credited with helping to organize and build the Universalist Church in Mitchellville. As the first church in the city, it served as a meeting place for all of the local congregations. The church was also used for classroom space until a town school could be built.

Mitchell held a number of elective offices during his lifetime. He served as Polk County Sheriff from 1846-1848 and as County Commissioner (Supervisor) from 1859-1865. Mitchell was elected to the State House of Representatives in 1858 and to the State Senate in 1874 and 1876. He also served as the president of the Old Settler's Association when it was organized in 1868.

Thomas Mitchell died on July 5, 1894, in the home he had moved to Mitchellville almost thirty years earlier. More than 1000 people attended his funeral at the Universalist Church, and he was buried in the Mitchellville Cemetery.

Thomas Mitchell Park, located five miles east of Altoona, was named in honor of Thomas Mitchell. The site of Apple Grove Inn along Camp Creek is located within the park, but it is no longer visible. Mitchell is remembered by a monument in the park and the town of Mitchellville that bears his name.

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