

“Meeker Key Figure in Area’s Settlement
From Franklin’s Past, Part I”
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Originally published in The Ottawa Herald, June 6, 1985

The story of the white man’s suppression of the American Indian is an ugly one. White traders, government agents, military men and others frequently were culprits in plots to take the Indians’ land, personal possessions, self-respect and lives.

Only a few whites, some of them missionaries of varying abilities, motives and dedication, came to the Indians’ aid. For better or worse, these men and women worked to not only convert the Indians to the white man’s God, but also tried to help the Indians adjust to the inevitability of the white man’s civilization.

One such missionary was the Rev. Jotham Meeker, who chose to spend much of his life in ministering to the physical and spiritual needs of the Ottawa Indians. In doing so, he came to play not only a major role in the Ottawa tribe, but today also assumes an important place in the history of both Franklin County and Kansas.

Born in 1804 in Ohio, Meeker was converted to the Baptist faith at a young age. After hearing a missionary tell of the plight of the Indians, he left his Cincinnati print shop and devoted himself to mission work among various tribes in Michigan and northern Ohio.

In the course of preaching the gospel, Meeker gained the Indian name “Manokeeketch,” or “he who speaks good words.” He also gained a wife, Eleanor Richardson Meeker, who was a fellow missionary and teacher.

While in the mission field, Meeker learned to speak the Ottawa, Pottawatomie and Chippewa languages, which were closely related. Yet, he was disturbed that there was no system to teach the Indians to read in their own language. Aided by his printing background, Meeker successfully translated the Ottawa language into a written form using the English alphabet.

This major accomplishment brought him to the attention of other missions, and in 1833 the Meekers came to Kansas for translation work among the Shawnees at what is now Shawnee Mission. With them Meeker brought a printing press, the first in Kansas, to print books in the various Indian languages to which he had adapted this system. He therefore printed both the first book and the first newspaper in what is now the state of Kansas.

After four years at Shawnee, Meeker and his family settled on the new Ottawa reserve in the heart of what later became Franklin County. It was here that the Rev. Meeker devoted the final years of his life, 1837-55.

It was not an easy existence. Meeker’s dedication to improving the quality of life among the displaced and sickness-ravaged Ottawas made many demands on his time and talents.

Primarily, he was the Ottawas’ minister, doctor and teacher. Yet, he also served as their printer, banker, attorney, dentist, interpreter, building foreman, farming instructor, accountant and spokesman. On occasion he even built their coffins, dug their graves and chiseled their tombstones.

Above all else, Meeker was the Ottawas' friend. Patient and loyal, he earned their unshakable trust largely because he repeatedly showed that he trusted and believed in them.

That bond was not forged overnight, but through great patience and perseverance. When Meeker first came to the Ottawas in this area, he was met by indifference and suspicion. His church services were attended by only two or three curiosity seekers. Even they sometimes left in the middle of the sermon to join in the noisy gambling games and wrestling matches just outside the church door.

Meeker's daily journal relates many "setbacks," such as when there were drinking and dancing ceremonies just a few yards from the mission. He also tells of having to disarm a drunken Indian who tried to attack him with a knife.

Meeker's example was noted, however, and his church slowly grew. An observer in 1852 wrote: "Too much praise cannot be given to this worthy gentleman for the deep interest ever exhibited by him in everything touching the interests of this tribe; and to him, more than to all others, are the Ottawas indebted for the rapid and beneficial improvement in their condition."

The Rev. Meeker's work came to an end Jan. 12, 1855, when he died following a brief illness. Stunned by their loss, the Ottawas went into mourning, saying "Another Mr. Meeker will never come to us; we will never find a friend like him.