

“There Was a Good Woman Behind Meeker
From Franklin’s Past, Part II”

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The Rev. Jotham Meeker’s work among the Indians in what is now Franklin County was not accomplished alone. He was aided enormously in founding the Ottawa Baptist Mission by an equally talented and courageous missionary and teacher. Her name was Eleanor.

Born in Ohio in 1810, Eleanor Richardson proved she was an unusual woman at an early age. When still single and only in her teens, she left her comfortable home and set out for Indian lands to conduct a mission school. She soon met and married Jotham Meeker, becoming his partner in his work among the Ottawas.

She also became the mother of a son, who died young, and three girls. Her eldest daughter, Maria, is believed to be the first white girl born in what later became the state of Kansas. Coming to this area in 1837 also made Eleanor Meeker perhaps the first white woman to settle in present-day Franklin County.

Her daily domestic chores were like any other pioneer woman. She was responsible for raising the children, cooking, cleaning, sewing, baking, gardening and making soap and candles—among other chores. Those tasks alone were enough to require long days of labor.

However, like her husband, Mrs. Meeker also had responsibilities to the Ottawas. She taught the Indian women new methods of cooking, sewing and knitting, made medicines and helped nurse the ill. As one observer wrote, the Ottawa women “resort to her for counsel in great numbers, and daily. She fluently speaks the Ottawa language...her usefulness is the greater for this acquirement.”

She also was expected to care for any number of unexpected visitors traveling through the area who used the mission as a hotel. From congressmen to teamsters, they would sometimes arrive in the middle of the night and need both food and shelter.

With the primitive living conditions and the weight of their workloads, it is not surprising the Meekers rarely were in good health. They nursed themselves, their daughters and the Ottawas to recover from toothaches, the ague, quinsy, backaches and headaches, colds, measles, consumption, liver pains, chills, whooping cough, stomach disorders, dysentery, fevers and cholera.

The great flood of 1844 was one of the most disastrous hardships the Meekers faced. Not only was nearly everything they owned washed away or ruined, but the Rev. Meeker almost drowned as well.

Other hardships and worries the Meekers endured were whiskey peddlers and the resulting drunken Indians, droughts, severe winters and horseflies so thick in hot summers that people could only travel at night. On several occasions, Eleanor Meeker joined her husband in fighting prairie fires.

Of all the hardships she endured, however, probably none was felt so keenly as the loneliness of the frontier. After first arriving here in 1837, it was more than a year before she saw another white woman. Even in later years the nearest white woman, someone of similar background and experience, lived 15 miles away. Eleanor described those many years as ones “with no sympathizing friend to give a word of encouragement, or a friendly look to cheer our troubled hearts.”

Even her three girls were a comfort for only a short time. Concerned about their daughters’ education, the Meekers sent the girls to schools in Ohio as early as the age of 8. Mrs. Meeker wrote to her family, “I frequently wet my pillow with tears while thinking of you.”

The work and hardship took their toll on the Meekers. In 1850, Eleanor wrote, "I think people grow old faster in this country than in any other." Later, she added, "I am continually reminded that my fabric which is decaying must soon fall."

When her husband died in 1855, she wrote, "I feel perfectly lost. I know not one half of my time what I am doing." She also noted, "I do think I feel more lonely than I would had we not lived so many years secluded from society."

To honor his deathbed request, Eleanor Meeker buried her husband in the Ottawa Mission Cemetery, 20 feet behind the pulpit of the log church. Just a year later she was buried beside him, a worn-out old woman. She was only 46.