

Port Royal: The capital wannabee

History Musings
ELLEN WILSON-PRUITT

The Old Town Waverly Festival will be held Sept. 28-29. In addition to being entertaining, the majority of the events during the two days are directed toward being educational and illustrating the time period of Morgan County's earliest settlement.

Did you know that the state capital was almost located in Waverly? In its early days, the location near Waverly was known as Port Royal. The Indiana territory was settled first along the Ohio River, and settlers then moved northward up the state. Vincennes was the original center of activity, but then in 1813, the capital of the territory (Indiana was not yet a state) was moved to Corydon.

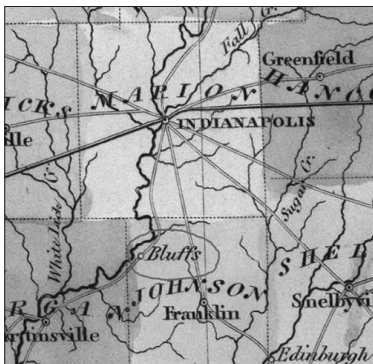
Now you must remember that the northern part of the state was still under Indian control. It was important to try and bring settlers in to discourage the Indians from reclaiming territories. This is the period when my ancestors came into Indiana and settled in Clark County.

Indiana gained statehood in 1816, and at the time, Corydon was still the capital. The Treaty of St. Mary's in 1818 opened up everything south of the Wabash for settlement.

In doing this, the talk again arose about moving the center of government for the state more centrally. In 1820, a commission was formed by the Legislature to go "into the wilderness" and select a site. The commission was to be comprised of 10. Nine of them met in 1820 at William Conner's cabin — located where Conner Prairie is found today.



The bluffs just off White River near Waverly mark the area that was once known as Port Royal, which nearly became the state capital way back when. (Courtesy photo)



(Courtesy map)

William Conner's history is a saga in and of itself. Jonathan Jennings was then the governor and in attendance.

During this time, Jacob Wetzel was blazing a 60-mile trace through Rush, Shelby and Johnson counties to the bluffs at White River near today's Waverly. He then built a farmstead and a community began to settle. Morgan County was created in December of 1821. The neighborhood that was originally referred to as The Bluffs or Port Royal began settling between 1819 and 1820.

Christopher Ladd, who was a friend of Jacob Wetzel, was instrumental in organizing the settlement that was platted as the town of Port Royal three months before Morgan County was created. Port Royal was laid out in

September of 1821.

History of Johnson County notes the town had a post office from 1824-1835, and that same source details the plat for the town, which was filed on May 18, 1822. It was located just one mile north of Waverly and original consisted of 43 lots and five streets.

Port Royal began to grow with Mr. Ladd's tavern and general store, two necessities for a thriving community of the time. During the search for a capital site, Port Royal was in strong contention. It is said that the commission rejected it by a vote of 5-3. Consideration was that the area

of Indianapolis had greater potential for the landing of flatboats, which was the major means of transport of commerce at the time. One of the members on the commission, John Tipton, made note that in investigation, he encountered a section of river (south of Martinsville) where there was a channel of islands where the river split several ways. This challenge would have to be corrected in order to allow passage of any watercraft. Perhaps this note of river topography served as a deciding point.

Port Royal was serving as a shipping port during this time and Indianapolis was not. But the vote was in, and Indianapolis got the nod. Ratification of the Commissioner's selection was done on Jan. 6, 1821.

Port Royal eventually began wane, and the most of the lots once planned for the town were sold off. But just south, the settlement of Waverly began to boom when the Central Canal was dug that far in 1837. You may remember that the proposed Central Canal was a victim of the Financial Panic of 1837 and was never completed. Sounds like the road construction of today.

Just think if just two of those commissioners had voted in favor of locating the state capital in Port Royal?

Today, we might see Lucas Oil Stadium looming in the skyline at Waverly. Perhaps we would hear the roar of the Speedway at Centerton, and Morgan County could be known as the home of the most roundabouts in the country.

The moral of the story — always remember that every vote counts!

World War II at 80: September 1944

Advance halted in Holland: Operation Market Garden

By Ronald P. May

Allied forces continued their advance into enemy territory in September 1944. But in one key location, the advance was halted and proved disastrous.

The Pacific Theater

In the Pacific theater, 28,000 men of the 1st Marine Division landed on the island of Peleliu in the Palau Islands on Sept. 15. It became a successful operation, but at the cost of some deep sacrifices.

Japanese defenders numbering 11,000 provided stiff resistance and forced the campaign to stretch almost 10 weeks before the Marines, augmented by the 17,000 soldiers of the 81st Army Infantry Division, finally secured the island.

The victory came at the price of over 10,000 American casualties, just over 2,000 of which were killed.

Meanwhile, 423 miles east of Peleliu, and a closing-in 1,300 miles south of Tokyo, U.S. forces from the 323rd Regimental Combat Team of the 81st Infantry Division enjoyed a cakewalk victory in securing an unknown coral reef atoll at Ulithi, part of the Caroline Islands chain.

Ulithi, a tiny coral atoll 20 miles long and 15 miles wide, consisted of 40 small islets of which only four were inhabited.

The area was under Japanese control, but with just 17 soldiers stationed there, it was hardly valued.

Admiral Chester Nimitz, commander in chief of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, noticed it on the map and recognized its true value, which was not in the meager land mass but in the deep-sea anchorage potential all around it.

Following the Army taking over the island, Navy Seabees immediately got to work creating pontoon piers for docking ships and establishing a massive Naval base from which ships could be refueled, repaired, and resupplied, and crews could be supported.

Now, instead of having to return to the Naval Base in Pearl Harbor for repairs and supplies, ships could be serviced right in the Pacific Theater.

Ulithi quickly became a forward staging base for fu-



Paratroopers fill the sky as part of Operation Market Garden, the largest drop of American and British troops thus far attempted. (Public domain photo)

ture invasions in the Pacific Islands as U.S. forces continued their island-hopping campaign toward Japan.

During late 1944 and throughout 1945, the Naval base at Ulithi had the capacity to support over 600 ships at a time, easily becoming the largest naval base in the world.

The European Theater

Allied advancement was looking bright as ground forces entered Belgium on Sept. 2, and some units even reached the German border at the Siegfried Line, Germany's western defense wall on Sept. 13.

The momentum inspired British Field Marshall Bernard Montgomery to propose a bold but risky operation to storm Germany more quickly.

Code-named Operation Market Garden, the plan called for the largest drop of American and British airborne divisions thus far attempted.

The goal was to secure key roads and bridges along the main road (eventually referred to as "Hell's Highway") linking Eindhoven, Nijmegen and Arnhem in southeastern Netherlands.

The key objective was the bridge in Arnhem that would allow Allied forces to quickly cross the Rhine River, a major natural barrier, and into Germany.

The operation kicked off on Sept. 17 with the landing of American and British airborne divisions near the key cities of Eindhoven, Nijmegen and Arnhem.

The paratroopers executed their jobs superbly, but the British armor and motorized forces were delayed from moving up Hell's Highway by German resistance.

The delay was costly, as the success of the operation



U.S. Marines engage in combat during their fight on Peleliu. (Public domain photo)



(Public domain map)

depended on a tight timeline to augment and relieve the paratroopers who were equipped for only a few days of battle before the full German forces could respond.

Not only did the operation to secure the bridge at Arnhem fail, denying an Allied crossing of the Rhine, a costly 6,000 British paratroopers were captured by German forces and almost 8,000 British paratroopers

became casualties.

A daring rescue operation on Sept. 25 brought the surviving British paratroopers back to the safety of Allied lines and concluded the failed campaign.

During Operation Market Garden U.S. Airborne forces successfully met their objectives of securing roads and bridges at Eindhoven and Nijmegen.

A local casualty

Among the brave U.S.

PARATROOPER MEETS DEATH IN HOLLAND

PVT. BYRON SYKES KILLED IN ACTION SEPTEMBER 19, WAR DEPARTMENT ANNOUNCES

Pvt. Byron T. Sykes, a veteran of three years' service in the paratroopers, was killed in Holland September 19, according to a war department telegram received by relatives in this city at noon today.

Pvt. Sykes, son of Mr. and Mrs. Clarence Sykes and husband of Mrs. Virginia Staley Sykes, was 25 years of age and had been overseas about a year.

He was a graduate of Martinsville high school and entered the service October 1, 1941. After completing his training he went to England, where his unit was based.

He took part in D-day in France and after fighting through the early phases of that campaign was returned to England for a short furlough.

The unit to which he was assigned went into action again in Holland on September 17 and, according to the telegram, his death occurred two days later while battling the enemy.

(Courtesy clipping)

paratroopers was Byron Sykes from Martinsville, Indiana.

Born on July 13, 1919, Sykes was a 1941 graduate of Martinsville High School and worked as a grinder before enlisting.

He married Virginia Staley on Feb. 17, 1943, in Muncie while he was stationed at Fort Bragg in North Carolina. Tragically, their son, Gordon Sykes, was born prematurely on Aug. 9 and died three days later.

Sykes was assigned to the 502nd Parachute Infantry Regiment, part of the 101st Airborne Division.

His unit left for England in September 1943. For the next eight months, the paratroopers underwent rigorous training for upcoming airborne operations, which included hikes of 15-25 miles and close combat drills.

While on special guard duty in England, Sykes saw Prime Minister Churchill and Gen. Ike Eisenhower while they reviewed the paratroopers in the spring of 1944.

As reported in the April 6, 1944, *Daily Reporter*, "He was within a few feet of the dignitaries when they conducted their review, and he said both Churchill and Eisenhower were generous in their praise of the paratroopers."

Sykes participated in the airborne drop over Normandy on June 6, 1944. His unit secured two northern causeways leading inland



Pvt. Byron Sykes

from Utah Beach for the 4th Infantry Division's advancement.

His unit was called on again to participate in Operation Market Garden in September.

The 101st Airborne Division landed on Sept. 17 in southeastern Netherlands near the city of Best.

On Sept. 19, Sykes' 2nd battalion secured a glider landing zone where the men encountered stiff German resistance.

In the ensuing firefight, Sykes was mortally wounded. He died that same day, at the age of 25, and was buried in a temporary burial ground.

Sykes' parents and wife were notified of his death in an Oct. 4 telegram. His widow, Virginia, opted to have her husband's body later buried at the Netherlands American Cemetery in Margraten.

Dedicated in 1960, the 65-acre cemetery holds the remains of 8,288 American service members who died in combat while fighting nearby. Along with Sykes, 260 other Hoosiers are buried there.

Operation Market Garden was the only defeat of Allied Forces by Germany in Europe after the Normandy landing.

The failure resulted not only in the deaths of thousands (4,000 dead or wounded Americans and 12,000 dead or wounded British and Polish soldiers), it delayed victory over the German forces for another eight months while the Allies went back to the drawing board on how to advance through Germany and cross the troublesome Rhine River.

Next time: October 1944

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