

Who's First

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In 1855 Nathan Sargent built a house and blacksmith shop on a site located at the Northeast corner of the intersection between Water (US 31) and Dowling Streets in what is now Montague Michigan. This land was given to his father, Job Sargent, for his service in the War of 1812. Job is commonly believed to be the first settler of Montague, but some believe that since he had already established his homestead prior to Montague being platted that he couldn't be the first settler. Regardless of how one believes this technicality, the Sargents were some of the earliest pioneers of the Montague area.

Noah H. Ferry had obtained ownership of much of the land where Montague now exists, and in the early 1860's developed the original plat of the town. Buttermilk creek divides Montague, creating the North hill and the South hill. The first homes built in Montague were on the South hill, the reason for which is unknown but perhaps it was due to the ease of obtaining supplies, relatively speaking.

The first "residential dwelling" established on the South hill was by Frank and Sophia Baker in 1866. They purchased lots 4, 5, and 6 of Block 32 shortly after Frank returned from the civil war. When they arrived at this site they were greeted by a dense forest of oak saplings and fallen logs resulting from the harvest of pine

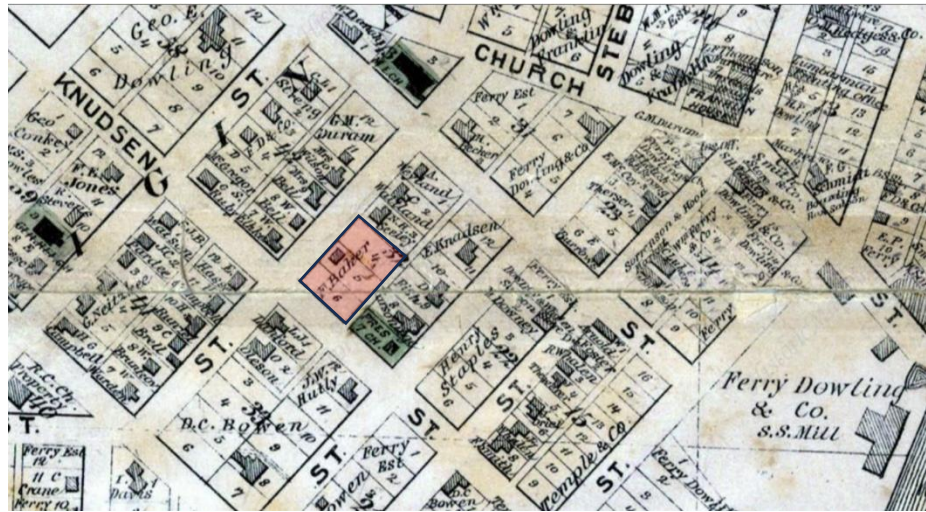


Figure 1. Frank and Sophia Baker property 1877 (Courtesy of Historicmapworks.com)

timber. Frank had to clear this debris before he could commence construction of his home using lumber manufactured by the Heald sawmill located at the "Mouth."

Frank Baker was born in Prussia in 1829 and emigrated to the United States in 1844 ending up in "White River." This is where he met Sophia Klunder who was born in Mecklenburg, Germany on January 28, 1838, and had emigrated to the United States in 1849.

Frank and Sophia married in 1855 and had the distinction of erecting the first dwelling at the "Mouth" or what was commonly called White River. This dwelling was built on the banks of the old channel and by 1900 the remains of this building were nearly covered by shifting sands.

Figure 2 shows the 1864 map of Ferrisville, which is one of several names of which White River was known. The map also shows several buildings along the West side of the White River channel. One of these dwellings could have been the home of Frank and Sophia Baker.



Figure 2. 1864 Map of Ferrisville from “Map of the Counties of Ottawa and Muskegon”

The Civil war commenced on April 12, 1861, and Frank

responded to the call in early 1862 from Noah H. Ferry to enlist in a newly created “White River Guard.” Within a day of this call, 101 other men, along with 33-year-old Frank, enlisted to form Company F, Fifth Michigan Volunteer Cavalry. This company was known as the White River Tigers or The White River Boys. This company mustered out on June 23, 1865, and Frank came home to his wife and 3 children.

The U.S. Federal Census records noted that Frank had the occupation of a blacksmith, but various directories listed Frank as an engineer. These two occupations were considered the same during the latter half of 1800, and Frank worked on a passenger/freight steamer named Marquette which engaged in fruit trade between the east shore of Lake Michigan and Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Sophia maintained the homestead during his absence as well as raising their seven children.

The Baker family subsequently witnessed more and more settlers come to the area and tame the South hill with their homes and barns. By 1870 most of the South hill had been cleared and settled as seen in Figure 3.



Figure 3. Frank Baker home on the South hill in 1870

During 1874 they had a front row view to the construction of the Presbyterian Church which was erected on a lot directly behind their home. A parsonage constructed next to the church joined to interfere with the unobstructed view of White Lake that they had enjoyed for the past few years.

Frank built a larger home on a lot adjacent to his home circa 1880 and moved his family to this more spacious abode. Their original home constructed in 1866 languished in place until June 1899 when it was torn down by their grandson Clinton Conley.

Their new house served as their home until the turn of the century when Sophia passed away on November 20, 1900. Frank was moved to the Old Soldiers Home in Grand Rapids shortly thereafter and remained there until his death on January 31, 1911. Frank was interred at the Old Soldiers Home cemetery initially but was re-interred at the Oakhurst cemetery in Whitehall, Michigan next to his wife and first son William.

Displaying true pioneer spirit, Frank and Sophia Baker were “first” twice with the remains of their first home hidden by natural earth processes, and their second home succumbing to human endeavor. Their final home can still be seen East of the intersection of Meade and Knudsen streets in Montague, Michigan.

Resources

Historicmapworks.com

Maps of the Counties of Ottawa and Muskegon and part of Allegan Michigan 1864

Findagrave.com

The Montague Observer, August 27, 1891

The Montague Observer, September 17, 1891

The Montague Observer, June 15, 1899

The Montague Observer, November 22, 1900

The Whitehall Forum, November 22, 1900

The Whitehall Forum, November 29, 1900

The Montague Observer, February 2, 1911