

Northern Kentucky Views Presents:

The Early History and Development of Ft. Mitchell

by

Mr. John R. Blakely

A Gist Historical Society Paper

May 24, 1955

www.nkyviews.com

3X5 ✓
"THE EARLY HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF
FT. MITCHELL"

Papers of CGHS.
Vol. 6. 1954-5

Paper read by John R. Blakely before the Christopher Gist Historical Society, May 24, 1955.

The town of Ft. Mitchell, a name adopted for many years by the area adjoining it on either side was so designated in honor of Ormsby MacKnight Mitchel, an astronomer and Union soldier.

Mitchel was of Scotch-Irish descent and was born on July 28, 1809, in Union County, Kentucky, settling near what is now Morganfield. When he was two or three years old his father died and the widow moved with her children to Lebanon, Ohio, not far from Cincinnati, where he received his early schooling.

Around the age of 16 he applied for and secured an appointment to the United States Military Academy, graduating 15th in a class of 46 in 1829. His love for mathematics resulted in such marked proficiency that upon graduation he was detailed as assistant professor at the Academy. There he met a young widow, Louisa Clark Trask, whom he married in 1831. After brief service at Ft. Marion, St. Augustine, Florida, Mitchel resigned his commission in 1832 and moved to Cincinnati. While teaching at West Point he had studied law. He was now admitted to the Bar and became the partner of E. D. Mansfield. Neither partner really cared for the law, however, and before long Mansfield became a journalist and Mitchel drifted back into teaching.

In 1836 he was appointed to the faculty of Cincinnati College as Professor Mathematics, Philosophy and Astronomy. In 1836-1837 he was also chief engineer of the Little Miami Railroad.

In his teaching of astronomy he became enthusiastic himself on the subject and aroused so great an interest in his students and their friends that he was persuaded to give a short course of public lectures. His gift of oratory, together with indomitable energy and perseverance, enabled Mitchel to carry into completion a scheme which at first seemed visionary. In 1825 John Quincy Adams had endeavored to persuade Congress to found a national observatory, but without avail. In 1843, however, Mitchel's lectures on celestial phenomena raised his audience to such a pitch of enthusiasm that they provided him with the means to erect on Mt. Adams the second largest telescope in the world and by far the largest on the western continent. There Mitchell perfected a variety of apparatus of great use to astronomy. One of the most important of his constructions was a device for recording light ascensions and declinations to within 1/1000 of a second.

Soon after the outbreak of the civil war, the president appointed him brigadier-general of volunteers and he was assigned to command the Department of the Ohio, which was later combined with the Department of the Cumberland and Mitchel served under General D. C. Buell. In 1862 he made the memorable dash from Shelbyville, Tennessee to Huntsville, Alabama, surprising and capturing the city without firing a shot and thus getting control of the Memphis and Charleston Railroad. For this exploit he was promoted to be major-general of volunteers. His relations with Buell, who found his discipline lax and his control of his troops unsatisfactory, grew increasingly strained, however; and in the summer of 1862 he tendered his resignation. It was not accepted, but in the fall he was transferred to the command of the Department of the South and the Tenth Army Corps with headquarters at

Hilton Head, South Carolina. Before he could organize the work there he was stricken with yellow fever and died at Beaufort on October 30, 1861.

During his lifetime he edited and published the Sidereal Messenger, and was the author of several books, among them Planetary and Stellar Worlds, Popular Astronomy and a posthumous volume, The Astronomy of the Bible copyrighted in 1863.

The fortress named in his honor was erected a short time before his death.

In the spring of 1862 following Kirby Smith's invasion of Kentucky, General John Hunt Morgan, with a small force of men, commenced a series of raids in south and central Kentucky. It was on July 17, 1862, that Morgan met and defeated a superior force of Union Troops under Colonels Metcalfe and Landrum at Cynthiana. A number of Newport volunteers were killed or captured in this raid. Gestures were made in the direction of Covington which so alarmed General Lew Wallace, the military comandant of the Cincinnati District, that martial law was invoked in Covington, a 10:00 o'clock curfew declared and citizens were forbidden to appear on the streets after that hour on penalty of being shot down.

A pontoon bridge was built across the Ohio River to the foot of Greenup Street and within a short time there were ten miles of entrenchments lining the Kentucky hills from Bromley to a point almost opposite Coney Island. In swift succession a series of fortifications surrounded Covington. These earthworks were named Ft. Kyle, Ft. Henry, Ft. Bates, Ft. Wright, Ft. Rich, Ft. Perry and Ft. Mitchell.

General Wallace established his Covington Headquarters near 26th and Madison, and the firm of McVey and Reed, Teamsters, was employed to haul ammunition and rations to Ft. Mitchell and the other fortifications. Tom Reed, the grandfather of T. C. Reed, was a partner in this firm.

General Heath's army probably numbering around 5000 approached Covington from the Madison Pike, fought a brief engagement with Union Troops near the Weisenberger home in Sandfordtown crossed over Dudley Pike to the Lexington Pike and took up its position in the hills and woodlands before Ft. Mitchell.

In Cincinnati all business had been suspended and citizens were urged to take up arms. Soldier Henry Howe was one of those who yielded to the "inexorable logic of military despotism". Howe says in his diary

"Of course, there were a few timid creatures who failed to obey the summons. Sudden illness overtook some, others were hunted up by armed men with fixed bayonets and ferreted from back kitchens, garrets, cellars and closets and even under the beds where they were hiding. One peacefully excited individual was found in his wife's clothes scrubbing in the washtub".

It must have been an unwilling army.

According to D. Collins Lee, who followed the trail a few years before his death, Fort Bates was located on a hill overlooking the Ohio River. Next in line was Ft. Henry. This was a circular fortification consisting of a trench about 4 ft. deep surrounded by earthworks. Its remains are located near the Devou Park Tennis Courts and are still visible. From there the old road could be traced up a steep hill to Ft. Rich, which took its name from the family who owned the land. Thence it continued eastwardly for almost a mile to Ft. Perry. South of

these two forts could be found a few remaining vestiges of the rifle pits. From Ft. Perry the old road meanders a short distance toward the old site of Ft. Mitchell and then was lost. Picking up the trail again at the present Barrington Woods Subdivision, the line of communication crossed the Lexington Pike and followed Kyles Lane to Ft. Wright, now a town bearing that name. Ft. Kyle, close by, was situated near a dairy at the intersection of Highland Pike and Kyles Lane.

The ramparts of old Ft. Mitchell were located squarely where the home of Mrs. Hall Hagemeyer now stands. John W. Menzies says Ft. Mitchell was not of log construction as would appear from the pictures painted by the artist, Mathews, about that time, but was built of clay. Mr. Menzies frequently went hunting on the heights shortly after the turn of the century and says the earthworks were then still visible.

The late Thornton W. Hinkle writes:

"We were working in the trenches when word came that the Rebel Army was approaching. The scene was one of wildest confusion... We having no arms preferred to take a less prominent position in case of attack and were ordered to the rear...satisfied that as we citizens had done our duty in the trenches, to leave the soldiers free possession of the field".

The Cincinnati Gazette reported that from the ramparts

"We could see hundreds of the enemy moving about in the saddle and on foot. Skirmishing occurred between pickets on the Lexington Pike between the residences of Messrs. Buckner and Staub and near the edge of a wood.

On Beechwood Road, so the tradition goes, three Confederate soldiers were killed. If this be true then these were the only Confederate casualties of the war between the states in Kenton County. Sgt. Wm. Cleek of Company A, 104th Regiment of Ohio Volunteers was the only Union soldier who lost his life in this engagement.

We return to the diary of Soldier Howe. Left to the tender mercies of an incompetent captain of the Home Guards he was on September 10, 1862, marched across the pontoon bridge, into Covington, up the old Lexington Pike under a boiling September sun to the top of the hill, and after instructions to place the ball in first and then the powder, he was handed a musket and thrust into the front line to do his duty.

"You may ask what my sensations were" he says "as I thus stood with uplifted musket and expectant attitude. To be honest my teeth chattered uncontrollably...I reasoned this way: Our men are all raw-armed with the old, condemned Belgian Rifle... not one in ten can be discharged. Militia situated like us are worthless when attached by veterans. A hundred experienced cavalrymen, dashing down with drawn sabers, revolvers, and secesh yells will scatter us in twinkling. When the others run I'll drop beside this fence, simulate death and open an eye to the culminating circumstances".

It was a false alarm.

He concludes this delightful diary:

"Saturday, the 13th, we began our return march. ... The rebels had fallen back. Weary but dirt begrimed we were, in a tedious march, duly shown off by our officers to all their lady acquaintances until night came to our relief, and kindly covered us with her mantle and stopped the tomfoolery. The lambs led forth to slaughter thus returned safely to their fold, because the butcher hadn't come".

A. E. Mathews, an artist attached to the 31st Regiment of Ohio Volunteers, took a grimmer view of the proceedings. In the footnote to his sketch of Federal Troops crossing the Ohio River, he says

"The Confederate Army under command of General Kirby Smith was variously estimated from 15,000 to 30,000 men. There were poorly clad, but well armed, and considering their organization were tolerably well disciplined. Their officers were bitter desperadoes, and they united in their express determination to pillage Cincinnati against which they pretended to have some terrible grudge to settle. General Kirby Smith, the Confederate Commander, was much trusted by his troops, and was a cool and daring leader. Our sketch represents the Federal Volunteers crossing from Cincinnati to defend Kentucky".

Gen
Heath?
Mathews?

General Basil W. Duke of Morgan's staff, who was on the scene recites, in his book History of Morgan's Cavalry published in 1867, that for several days General Heath was close enough to have made a dash at Covington since "there were no other defenders in the works around the place than these extempore soldiers". Heath was prepared to attack but just as he was about to move up, he received dispatches from Kirby Smith not to do so, but to be prepared to return on short notice. General Smith expected to be soon called to reinforce General Bragg with his whole force to fight Buell's army before it reached Louisville, and apparently felt the maintenance of mobility of the troops under Heath was of more importance than the capture of Cincinnati. On or about September 17, 1862, Heath withdrew his troops to join Bragg's army near Louisville.

The ramparts of Ft. Mitchell, all but obliterated, testify to an episode that missed by so narrow a margin the attainment of historical importance.

Most of the area around Ft. Mitchell was granted to the Sandford family by Patrick Henry, Governor of Virginia. The house now occupied by the Sandford sisters has been in the continuous possession of that family down to the present time. John L. Sandford, the Covington Banker, built the frame house now owned by Mr. Willard L. Wade on the west side of Beechwood Road as a country residence. It was then surrounded by a park running from the Lexington Pike to Pleasant Run Creek and beyond. Mr. Sandford kept deer in this park.

Before the war between the states the Sandfords lived across the pike at the site now occupied by a motor court. The old house was recently destroyed.

The Sandford sisters never cease to be bitter and revengeful about the Union Soldiers who occupying that area poured a barrel of molasses into their piano. Alec Sandford used to reminisce how the Union Soldiers were quartered in their house and used the living room as a stable for their horses. Just before they left the

Union Soldiers went down into the fruit cellar, took out all of the preserves and threw the jars and contents against the walls of every room in the house.

The greater part of the land south and west of Ft. Mitchell almost to the Buttermilk Pike was owned by John L. Leathers, ancestor of the late Charlton Thompson and a steam boat captain. His old plantation was located on the west side of the Pike where Sunnymede Subdivision lies. It had a double decker porch in the front.

The house now occupied by William J. Deupree, Jr., was built and then owned by W. S. Porter, A Photographer. This used to be called the Tranter place and it was occupied by my grandparents, Laurie J. and Lillie L. Blakely, around the turn of the century. In writing of Ft. Mitchell in 1919 Mr. Thornton M. Hinkle probably had reference to this house

"Its site was upon the grounds of a beautiful suburban residence, all of whose beauties had been sacrificed to the ruthless destroyer, war. Great trenches intersected the lawns-here a heavy artillery road plowed up the flower gardens, while every tree of any size was cut down to open a free range for the cannon".

Mrs. James Paul Stevens, who lived with her parents, Mr. and Mrs. A. G. Simrall on Ridge Road about the date the town was first incorporated, says the area comprising all of Ft. Mitchell was then a treeless plain.

The old Perkins place, later the first club house of the Ft. Mitchell Country Club, the Krumpelman place, the Foltz homestead and a few farm houses were all that dotted the landscape around Ft. Mitchell for many years following the war between the states.

The open rolling countryside around Ft. Mitchell was quite adaptable for a residential subdivision. The Buckeye Molding, Sand, Brick and Quarry Company was the first to see possibilities in its development. This corporation organized by Adam Leppe, Frank J. Wade and Arthur J. Davies was chartered on April 4, 1892, for "the quarrying of stone and the purchase and sale of real estate". O. J. Carpenter, and A. G. Simrall and Charlton B. Thompson were on the Board of Directors. It purchased a large tract of land comprising substantially all of Ft. Mitchell proper from the golf course south to the highway with the exception of the Maple Avenue portion, the tract abutting Ft. Mitchell avenue between the highway and the street car right-of-way and, of course, the Heights.

Of equal significance was the construction of a street car line starting at Covington and having its terminus at a turn table opposite the Highland Cemetery on the Lexington Pike. A journey out the Lexington Pike was something to be avoided. You would put on your "duster" and travel over a rough macadamized road to the top of the hill, where you paid your fare to the toll gate operator, a one eyed man named Cody. Otherwise you could reach Ft. Mitchell only by taking the Southern Railway train at Ludlow and getting off at the Highland Station, on lower Beechwood Road, a stop long since abandoned. The Cincinnati, Covington and Erlanger Railway Company, later known as the Green Line, had for many years planned an extension of its line to Erlanger and Crescent Springs. The Erlanger and Crescent Springs projects were abandoned, however, although land was bought for that purpose. Finally, in the fall of 1903 the first Ft. Mitchell street car, a four wheeled "jitney" with two parallel seats on opposite sides running the length of the car, was driven through the town with the late John Gaynor at the controls. John W. Menzies says a load of 12 passengers was a full house in those days.

The Buckeye Company completed its survey in 1904 and as an inducement to the sale of its lots offered in 1906 reasonable terms to six men on the condition that each would build a residence and move into it within one year from the date of purchase. The offer was accepted by John G. Simrall, Frank D. Van Winkle, Phillip G. Quehl, Samuel K. Long, E. M. Gumpf and John W. Menzies. Deeds oddly were given on property to wives March 24, 1906, and the first of these pioneers to move in was Frank D. Van Winkle on October 1, 1906. Mr. Van Winkle was the father of Virginia Van Winkle, now Mrs. John Morlidge, the first white child born in the town proper. My father and mother had moved to Beechwood in 1906. My brother, Stephens B. Blakely was born there on July 14, 1907.

Though hardly worthy of the name, the streets in Ft. Mitchell subdivision were dedicated to public use on December 6, 1905. They were nothing more than furrows through a meadow and were, of course, impassable in bad weather. Sidewalks and curbing were non-existent. It is interesting to note some of the original street names and locations. Ridge Road was known as Crescent and joined Dry Run Road near the Highway. It was platted north from the street car right-of-way past the present Carran home, across the golf course thence curved slightly to intersect "Main Street", later Orchard just north of the present Ft. Mitchell Club annex, crossed the area now occupied by a swimming pool and joined Maple Avenue, later Edgewood, at Ft. Mitchell Avenue. Between the car line and the Lexington Pike Ft. Mitchell Avenue was not platted. Iris Road was known as "Sandford Street". Main or Orchard extended partially across the golf course while Ft. Mitchell and Maple extended across the second and fifth fairways, Maple curving to join Ft. Mitchell at a point overlooking the railroad tracks.

There were other companies prominent in the creation of Ft. Mitchell as a town. One of these was the Kenton County Land Company, organized on April 8, 1904, by O. J. Carpenter, D. L. Carpenter, B. Bramlage and George G. Perkins. This company sold to Ft. Mitchell Country Club, chartered a few weeks previously, the 75 acre tract of land now the club property on December 6, 1905. The old Perkins place near the corner of Coleman and Ridge Road had been leased and later bought by the Club Directors as temporary quarters until the Clubhouse could be erected. The home was later moved toward the Lexington Pike and was owned and occupied by the late George W. Hill and his family for many years.

The Ft. Mitchell Hotel and Real Estate Company, chartered on February 8, 1906, failed to conduct business. At least, I am unable to find any record of its having done so in the Ft. Mitchell area.

On May 15, 1909, a group of civic minded residents of the area gathered at the Ft. Mitchell Country Club. Present at this meeting were Frank D. Van Winkle, J. P. Stevens, Albert Marqua, Philip G. Quehl, J. W. Brownfield, J. W. Menzies, John G. Simrall, A. G. Simrall, H. P. Colville, George E. Engel, S. K. Long, G. F. Blauvelt, Fred Pieper, Henry Heile, Dr. William F. Reilly, Anthony F. Macklin, J. W. Rowlett, Joseph H. Craeghead, E. M. Gumpf, Fenimore Roudebush and George P. Diehl. A temporary organization was effected with A. G. Simrall as president and Frank D. Van Winkle as secretary. The chairman stated the object of the meeting was to consider ways and means necessary for the incorporation of a sixth class city, and upon motion appointed Messrs. Quehl, Craeghead and Colville to make an estimate of the population. After an examination of the plat on which a square of 1/4 mile scale had been placed, the committee reported that a population of 125 or more could easily be included. Mr. O. J. Carpenter offered to pay the court costs and other necessary expenses in filing papers and Mr. A. G. Simrall agreed to draw and present without expense to the Circuit Court such incorporation papers as might be

necessary. Each person present also pledged himself to subscribe \$5.00 to whatever fund might be necessary for expenses prior to the actual incorporation, with the exception of O. J. Carpenter, whose subscription was \$10.00.

Upon motion it was resolved that the city should be called Ft. Mitchell.

The reason for the apparent misspelling of the name seems to be lost in antiquity.

Ten days later an action was filed in the Kenton Circuit Court petitioning a judgment which would establish the town of Ft. Mitchell as a city of the sixth class. The petition bears the pencilled note of A. G. Simrall that "this petition is signed by all but two voters in the proposed town". *Inc. 1909*

On June 21, 1909, Judge William S. Harbeson granted the prayer in its entirety.

The town had gotten off to a bad start, however. Somebody discovered that the survey did not close due to a defect in one of the calls of the metes and bounds description so the town had to back up and start all over again. On November 24 of the same year an Amended Petition was filed setting out the error and stating in part

"The territory described in the Amended Petition has a number of houses therein and said territory has been platted into lots, and sewers and other improvements are necessary to the health and prosperity of the community and its further growth will be greatly retarded unless the said improvements are provided and said territory is incorporated as a sixth class city.

The population was listed at 127 people, or two more than the number necessary to incorporate as a town.

The old judgment was thus set aside and a new judgment entered bringing the town of Ft. Mitchell into existence.

From this beginning the town of Ft. Mitchell, rich in tradition, has increased in size and beauty. Volumes could be written on the history of the town and of its families since that time, a matter I will leave to later historians.

JOHN R. BLAKELY