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Forest Preserve District of DPC Research Report

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BEN FULLER AND FULLERSBURG:

A PIONEER SUCCESS STORY OF THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY

The naming of cities and villages in DuPage County provides an interesting feature of the area's history. Several of the county's pioneers attached their surnames to their settlements soon after reaching Illinois in the 1830's and 1840's. For example, Naperville inherited its name from Joseph Naper; Pierce Downer dubbed his settlement Downer's Grove; and Warren and Jessie Wheaton shared the credit for naming the present county seat. Similar to these examples, a small area known as Fullersburg between present day Oak Brook and Hinsdale received its appellation from one of the earliest settlers in eastern DuPage County, Benjamin Fuller. For over thirty years, Ben Fuller worked to develop the settlement bearing his name into a thriving, active society. The history of Fullersburg not only encompassed the success of Ben Fuller, but also comprised the lives of an entire community of Fullers dedicated to building a healthy, prosperous town.

Benjamin Fuller journeyed to DuPage County from New York in 1834. Like most of the settlers pushing westward, Ben sought a substantial tract of farmland. As he traveled into northeast DuPage County, he met Lieutenant Sherman King, an army scout, and Orente Grant, a surveyor, hunter and trapper. These two explorers probably were the first white men in the Salt Creek area. Grant and King directed Fuller south toward Brush Hill (named for the Hazelnut brush in the area) to find the rich farmland he desired. Ben bought land for \$1.25 an acre near present day Spring Road, two blocks north of the Oak Brook library. After making his claim, Fuller returned to New York to persuade the rest of his family to accompany him back to Brush Hill. In 1835, Ben returned to Illinois with his wife, Olive, his parents, Jacob and Candace, and his

eleven siblings. Unfortunately, the whole family could not fit into the small wagons used on the journey, so two of Ben's sisters took a boat to Chicago, via the Great Lakes. The two lucky girls missed the overland trip filled with storms, illness and flooded streams. Reunited in Chicago, the Fuller family headed for DuPage County.

During their first months on the frontier, the Fullers displayed the strong pioneer tenacity so characteristic of DuPage County's earliest settlers. Returning to Ben's original claim, the Fullers built a twenty-five by fifteen foot log cabin with a fireplace, flagstone floor, and an attic room for the children. Similar to many pioneer log cabins, rain leaked through the shingles and collected in ever-present pots and pans. In the winter, snowflakes poured through the roof and covered the beds in the attic; the Fullers dealt with this nuisance by dumping snow toward the ground floor and sweeping it outside.

Around 1837, Ben and Olive built their own log cabin near the Mays Lake site, next to the Pottawatomie Indian settlement. Ben enjoyed a friendly relationship with the Indians and taught them to shoe their ponies. In appreciation, the Pottawatomies presented Ben's son John with his own Indian pony, Ninoldi. As Fuller continued to develop his Brush Hill home, he devised inventions to perform various tasks more efficiently. For example, he installed a paddle wheel in Ginger Creek (a tributary of Salt Creek) to provide power for a handsaw to cut firewood. His neighbors were so impressed by this device that Ben became known as "Jacob Fuller's

oldest son, he made perpetual motion run."

Between 1835 and 1855, Ben Fuller purchased 800 acres of land in and around Fullersburg. Around 1840, Ben and Olive moved to their third DuPage County home at 948 York Road. During this period, Ben expanded his activities beyond farming. His other occupations included cabinet maker, real estate dealer and merchant. In 1843, Ben opened the Farmer's Home grocery located at present day Ogden Avenue and York Road; and in 1851, Ben erected the town's second inn, known in successive years as the Fullersburg Tavern, Deutches Guest House, and Grand Pacific Hotel (in 1858, Abraham Lincoln spoke from the porch of the hotel during his journeys across Illinois for the Lincoln-Douglas debates). Besides his commercial endeavors, Fuller held various public offices ranging from Postmaster and Road Supervisor to Justice of the Peace. By late 1851, Ben decided to plat Brush Hill and re-named the settlement Fullersburg, an appropriate name since nearly all of the inhabitants were Fullers or married to Fullers.

During the 1850's, Fullersburg expanded steadily. Frank Brown built a store at the northwest corner of Ogden and York, John Coe operated a blacksmith shop at the southwest corner, and Almeron Ford opened another store a few yards west of the Ogden-York junction. Alfred Walker opened the first cheese factory in the area, and possibly in northern Illinois. In addition, Fullersburg became a busy stopover point for farmers and merchants traveling from Chicago markets to the Illinois interior; both the Fullersburg Tavern and Castle Inn provided travelers with overnight

accommodations on their westward journey. In fact, this increased trade activity between Chicago and DuPage County provided the naming of Salt Creek. According to one account, a farmer's wagon carrying supplies from Chicago became stuck in Salt Creek. Unable to pull the wagon free, the farmer took his horses and left the loaded wagon in the creek overnight. When he returned the following morning to recover his supplies, the farmer discovered an entire barrel of salt had dissolved into the creek! Thus the creek became known as Salt Creek.

Besides Benjamin, a couple of other Fullers provided colorful addition to the history of Fullersburg. For example, Ben's niece, Loie Fuller, became a world famous dancer in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Loie began her dancing career in New York in 1878, and later toured South America and London, but she failed to achieve recognition among her peers and from show critics. Undaunted by her lack of success, Loie continued to work on her act and developed a dance using various pieces of colored silk to produce a vivid, flowing effect. She dubbed the dance "Serpentine", and the routine became a huge success. After the memorable Serpentine debut in Chicago, Loie appeared in London, Paris, Constantinople, St. Petersburg, and Moscow. She continued to dazzle the world with her unusual choreography until she died in Paris in 1928.

Ben's brother, Morell, also added color to the Fuller family history. Morell served in the Union Army during the Civil War and fought in many different battles, including Atlanta and Sherman's march to the sea. Morell never forgot his war experiences, for every Fourth of July after his discharge,

Morell donned his old army uniform, marched to the corner of Ogden and York Avenues at dawn, and pounded a drum for fifteen minutes. After this solo demonstration of patriotism, Morell marched back home - while a neighbor fired a shotgun over Morell's head as a final reminder of the war between the states. Morell would continue his march homeward, apparently oblivious to his friend's one-gun salute.

After living a full and varied life, and after watching Fullersburg grow and develop for thirty years, Benjamin Fuller died on September 1, 1868, at the age of fifty-eight, in the house on York Road. Four years later, the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy Railroad began operating daily trains between Chicago and Hinsdale. Like many DuPage County communities removed from a railroad depot, Fullersburg's growth halted suddenly and the settlement was destined to remain a small community of farmers and small businessmen. Finally, the town named after Ben Fuller and his family became annexed to Hinsdale in 1923.

About fifty-five years later, the Hinsdale and Oak Brook Historical Societies began a campaign to preserve the Ben Fuller home at 948 York Road. As the societies came closer to saving the house, however, both groups suddenly lost interest in the project. Nevertheless, a few citizens of the area continued to campaign for the preservation of the Fuller house and formed the Ben Fuller Museum Association in June, 1980. Two months later, the Association reached an agreement with the Forest Preserve District of DuPage County to relocate the Fuller house at Fullersburg Forest Preserve. In March, 1981, the Ben Fuller Museum Association deeded the house to the Forest Preserve District and took initial steps

for the house's restoration. In June, 1981, the Association hired the Robert A. Bell architectural firm to draw up plans to restore the house to its original 1840 design. The Bell organization had also worked on several other restoration projects, such as the Frank Lloyd Wright home and the Arthur Cutten Estate. Besides hiring the architects, the Museum Association began fund-raising efforts to raise \$75,000 to renovate the house. As of July, 1981, the house was placed on a newly poured foundation. The Association appears confident that the house will be restored within the two year deadline set by the Village of Oak Brook.

Note: If any of this material is ever used for a museum brochure, George Ruchty, historian of the Ben Fuller Museum Association, would like to examine the copy before publication.

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