

The British are coming. . . .

The Beatles as well as the midnight ride of Paul Revere represent significant events in our history. However, another group of people called the “English Colony” played an important role in local history in the latter 19th century. This group of people came to Martin County from England with a dream of becoming wealthy. They experienced numerous hardships in attempting to make their fortune by growing beans on Martin County farmland, and they also left an impact on Martin County in many respects.

A Connecticut lawyer, Henry Shearman, went on a hunting trip in Martin County in 1872. Being very impressed with the economic potential of the area, he purchased twenty-six acres of land five miles south of Fairmont for development as a model farm. He then went to England and founded the American Land Company for the sale of railroad lands in Martin County and southern Minnesota. Because England was beginning to experience a great depression in agriculture, Shearman also chose to advertise frontier farmland in America.

Being both resourceful and apparently somewhat of an entrepreneur, Shearman devised a plan to lure Britishers to Martin County. He published a pamphlet stating that investors could make their fortunes in a relatively short time by growing beans on Martin County farm land. He further stated that landowners could avoid physical labor by hiring all their work done by local residents, and that they could avoid the harsh Minnesota winters by returning to England for the social season each year. In addition, he also attempted to appeal to the English love of hunting by warning them in his pamphlet that they may well have to guard their crops from the abundance of wild animals and birds living in the Martin County area.

He first began experimenting with bean crops on his model farm in Martin County. Shortly thereafter, the first young English investors arrived in 1873, immediately buying land and planting beans in hopes of a quick fortune. Although Sherman’s land prices were likely overpriced, they were still relatively cheap compared to land prices in England at that time. That year they planted over 1,000 acres of beans. Most of these initial investors were recent college graduates, former military officers, clergymen, journalists, merchants, and policemen, all confident of creating a wealthy estate by

raising beans. They were mostly gentlemen and brought with them their English customs and manners. None were experienced farmers. Incidentally, one writer of the time deplored the fact that so many of the young Englishmen patronized the local saloons. He concluded that atmospheric conditions in this part of the world apparently enhanced the effects of alcohol on the British settlers to the region.

Locusts descended on Martin County in June of 1873, and in one day ate most of the crops. They replanted, but an early killing frost in October destroyed the second crop. Undaunted, they returned to England and recruited a large group of new investor-colonists to return the next spring.

In the spring of 1874, a new group of English colonists joined those from the previous year and hired the planting of beans on an even larger scale. However, during June the locusts hatched and once again destroyed the bean crop as well as other crops. They again replanted, and this time they finally did harvest a crop in the fall.

From 1875 through 1878 more Englishmen joined the colony and faced the locust plague to varying degrees as well as partial crop failures due to the weather. Eventually, the financial losses accompanying this endeavor forced many of the English colonists to abandon their efforts to grow beans. This forced some to venture into other enterprises.

In 1877, three Englishmen developed a cooperative cheese factory in Fairmont. They encountered problems and sold the factory to a private owner who became quite successful at the business. Some attempted other business ventures, including, a brewery, an ice house, a creamery, a hardware store, and a farm implement business. Others also had an interest in fine livestock including racehorses and purebred cattle.

Percy Wollaston was the premier colonist businessman of his time. He operated a 460 acre farm, a general store, a wind powered grist mill, and the Merchants & Farmers Bank in Fairmont until he moved to British Columbia in about 1910.

In 1877, several English colonists became part owners in the Bank of Fairmont. Many of their countrymen soon became depositors. However, as a result of too much generosity and leniency to borrowers, as well as overextending themselves in financing the construction of a lavish building

project, the Occidental Hotel, the bank failed in 1879. There were heavy colonist losses, and the bank was eventually absorbed by the rival Martin County Bank.

Despite numerous setbacks, the colony continued to expand. An exact number will probably never be known, however, the 1880 census indicates there were 219 Englishmen in Martin County. However, it is unclear as to how many of this number were members of Shearman's colony.

The most obvious legacy of the colony was the small group of English settlers that remained around the Fairmont area. Frederick Wherland and his large family enjoyed a comfortable living on his 160 acre Belvedere Farm near Pierce Lake. Although losing his 400 acre farm to the locust infestation, Cecil Sharpe remained in Fairmont where he was cashier at his father-in-law's Merchant & Farmers Bank. Frederick A. B. Peterson, discouraged with farming, became cashier and director of the Martin County Bank, treasurer of the Fairmont Building and Loan Association, and an officer of several other organizations. The Archer-Burtons, and their descendants, remained in the area working at various jobs in or near Fairmont. Others that remained in the area included Harry M. Serle, W. M. Hay, Joseph Ramsdale, H. W. Sinclair, K. ff. Bellairs, A. G. T. Broum, C. P. Cunningham, and others.

What impact did the English colonists have on Martin County? During that time period, their influence had a positive effect on the local economy by providing employment opportunities to local citizens as well as the fact that they spent much of their wealth in the area. They built a number of fine houses and buildings which were later used by local residents. The Englishmen's efforts in raising sheep may well have encouraged other farmers to acquire small flocks in later years, and Percy Wollaston's enterprises provided services to local residents for some years after the colony's decline.

Eventually, the largest group of colonists returned to England. A second group settled in various major cities in the United States. A third group emigrated to Canada, and the smallest group remained in Fairmont where they would become merchants, bankers, restaurant owners, realtors, tradesman, and local politicians. The efforts and effects of that early group of English settlers undoubtedly shaped the direction of Martin County in

those early years, as well as playing both a colorful and significant role in the development of local history.

Visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont to learn more about the English Colony of early Martin County.