



Introduction to the City of Muscatine

Pearl of the Mississippi

www.muscatineiowa.gov

Early History

Benjamin Nye is credited with having made the first settlement within the present county of Muscatine. This was in the spring of 1834. Mr. Nye laid out a town at the mouth of Pine Creek, situated about 12 miles northeast of Muscatine and named it **Montpelier**. Mr. Nye built a store and three separate mills with his last one, Pine Creek Grist Mill, still standing today in Wildcat Den State Park. Pine Creek offered perfect water power and for many years the early residents of the county brought their grain to his mill but the town itself was a failure.

Colonel George Davenport, who lived at the time in Rock Island, brought a stock of goods and established a trading post in what is now **Muscatine**, erecting a small log cabin and leaving the post in charge of an agent.

The year 1835 saw a number of new settlers in this area. **James W. Casey** started a trading post below that of Colonel Davenport, known as "*Casey's Wood Yard*" of Newburg. **Colonel John Vanater** who had been here several years before, returned and bought Colonel Davenport's post. The town of Bloomington was laid out in 1836 by Colonel Vanater who named the town for his hometown Bloomington, Indiana. This was the first survey by an act of the Wisconsin Territorial Legislature. Approved in January 8, 1837, Bloomington was made the county seat.

Bloomington was incorporated as a town of the second class on January 23, 1839 and on May 6th, its first president, **Joseph Williams** was elected. The population of Bloomington in January 1839 was 71 and there were 33 buildings in the town. In November, there were 84 houses in the city.

How Muscatine got its name

Historians differ in their ideas of how Muscatine got its name. Some claim it was taken from the Mascoutin Indians who lived in this area in the 18th century. The name "*Mascoutin*" means "*Fiery Nation*". Other historians claim the name came from the Indian name for what is now known as Muscatine Island. Because of the great difficulty in getting mail, (it was often sent to Bloomington, Illinois or Bloomington, Indiana and sometimes Burlington, Iowa), in 1850 the new name of **Muscatine** was adopted for both the town and county.

The name Muscatine is unique in that it is not used by any other city in the United States or the world.

Railroad Development

The period from 1854 to 1875 was marked by the coming of the railroads and the rapid settlement and development of the State of Iowa. The Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific Railroads were the first railroads to be built in Iowa reaching Rock Island, Illinois, in August 1854 and connecting with Iowa by ferry crossing the Mississippi River. On November 20, 1855, the Mississippi and Missouri Railroad, which later became part of the Rock Island System, operated the first passenger train between Davenport and Muscatine. This was also the first passenger train operated in the State of Iowa.

Early Muscatine Industry

Lumbering, saw and planing mills, sash and door factories and other forms of woodworking were a major industry in Muscatine. When the nearby forests were cut off, lumber operators moved up the Mississippi River and brought the logs downstream by water. With the coming of the railroad, lumber was shipped in, but through all these changes various types of woodworking continued to be Muscatine's major industry. Muscatine businessmen acquired forest lands and continued to operate saw mills in various parts of the county.

Pearl Button Industry

John Fred Boepple, a German immigrant with a flair for making buttons, came to Muscatine in 1887. By mistake, Boepple found that fresh water mussel shells, instead of animal horns, made a stronger button that more closely resembled the fashionable buttons made of expensive import marine shells. Nicholas Barry and his sons invented a machine which turned out better buttons with less labor. Muscatine soon became the world's largest pearl button manufacturer, its factories employing half of the Muscatine workforce during the turn of the century, earning it the name of "*Pearl Button Capital of the World.*" In 1905 over 1.5 billion pearl buttons were made in Muscatine. Today nearly all buttons are made from plastic.

Other Industrial Development

In 1892, after a nationwide investigation, **H.J. Heinz Company** decided to locate one of their principal canning plants in Muscatine, being the first expansion outside of Pittsburgh. Numerous additions have been made to this plant making it now the largest Heinz plant outside of Pittsburgh and the largest canning plant between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains.

The fertile soils of Muscatine make the area well known for producing some the highest quality agricultural products in the world with the famous Muscatine Melon being perhaps the most recognized.

Muscatine is home to the world headquarters of HNI (HON Corporation) that began here as a small businesses. Other companies have major facilities in Muscatine and a number of small and medium sized companies have become known nationally and internationally for their products.

Incorporation and Government

Muscatine acquired its present name in 1850. On February 21, 1851 Muscatine was incorporated by a special act of the Iowa State Legislature and is one of four Iowa cities that continues to operate under such special authority.

The city is the county seat of Muscatine County and has a mayor-council form of government. Day-to-day operations of the city are carried out under the supervision of a City Administrator.

We remain proud of our heritage and the strong industrial base present today. **Mark Twain**, who lived in Muscatine in 1854, once wrote "*I remember Muscatine for its summer sunsets. I have never seen any on either side of the ocean that equaled them.*" Our noted sunsets, joined together with the rolling terrain, quiet neighborhoods and strong sense of family values gives Muscatine a special personality all its own.