

Parkville Once Had An Island Off Its Shores

By Kenneth Klamm

I'm always searching for new and interesting information to write about for the Platte County Historical Society *Bulletin*, which I edit. Several years ago, I became aware of what had once been known as "the island" by many Parkville area locals. I further learned that this island once actually had residents and even a school or two.

My curiosity about this mysterious island eventually led me to the late Parkville historian Sylvia Gault. In a 2011 e-mail exchange, Sylvia wrote, "What was known as the "Island near Parkville" came about after a flood broke through the narrowest point of the long strip of land that separated the Platte River from the Missouri River until they merged just west of the western boundary of the original Parkville plat."

This strip of land, I discovered, was known as "The Narrows." William Paxton's *Annals of Platte County Missouri* (published in 1897) in an entry dated July 20, 1875, noted, "The rivers are rising from abundant rain. The Narrows between the Platte and Missouri rivers is only 20 feet wide." Following continued heavy rains, Paxton's September 24, 1875, entry noted: "The Narrows fell in and the mouth of the Platte is six miles higher up the Missouri. The old bed of the Platte, below The Narrows, becomes a slough, and gradually fills up."

Sylvia explained the flood "apparently left land surrounded by water on all sides until the old bed of the Platte eventually filled in, which came to be referred to as a slough for a time. Later floods caused the Platte to enter the Missouri even further up and some of what was the outer part of the Island was washed away, so I am not sure how much of the original land remains."

The 1877 *Illustrated Historical Atlas of Platte County* shows two school houses on what was considered the Island at that point. One of the schools "was known in the early days of the (Park) College as the Island School, which I think continued in existence for quite some time," said Sylvia. "There are some humorous stories about the efforts of the early Park ministerial students to hold services in various area school houses and I remember that one of those mentioned was the Island School."

A comparison of maps over the years shows the land prior to the break in The Narrows, and later after the Island had formed. The Island appears to have shifted eastward by the time the 1907 *Standard Atlas of Platte County* was published. Sylvia noted: "the area that became the Island had been settled just like every other part of the county, so there were several farmers that lived there."

Comparing 1877 and 1907 atlases, Sylvia wrote, "It would appear from the second (1907) map that there had been a great deal of change in the shape of the Island by that point, so much so that it resulted in the old channel of the Platte looking as if it connected to the Missouri River at two points. This caused a change in the bend of the river, bringing it directly in front of Parkville, where it had earlier been a little west of the town. In succeeding years, this continued to shift further east and resulted in the filling in of land in front of the town that is now the (English Landing) park and washing away virtually all of the southeastern portion of land southeast of town. You will note that there were very few houses indicated on the later map of the Island, which also does not show the school house that appears on the earlier map."

At that time I also contacted Platte County Historical Society (PCHS) Archivist Laverne Taulbee, who told me a note in her files mentioned a one-room schoolhouse between Parkville and Waldron known as Island School. As the river course changed, the schoolhouse "fell in the river," the note said. Laverne's archive volunteer assistants also found an undated map by historian William Paxton showing the Island, and labeled as "Waldron Island." The star on the map indicated a school on the Island. Paxton's *Annals* refers to Waldron Island in an entry from April 1, 1881: "Waldron Island is fast falling into the Missouri River." (Sylvia said this must have been the upper part in the west which by the 1907 atlas was no longer part of the Island).

The Island is mentioned in various records from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. PCHS Archive volunteers found a petition for sale of real estate owned by the estate of Martha J. Moody,

deceased, dated August 6, 1883, which mentions an expense for repairs of “fencing on the real estate which is located on the Island between Mo. and Platte River.” Elsewhere, the petition mentions “the real estate of decedent consisting as aforesaid of a small body of land on the ‘Island’.”

The *Platte County Gazette* of May 25, 1905, included the obituary of John Martin, an Island resident. The obituary states, “Deceased had resided for a great many years on ‘the island’ above town, and at the time of his going away was the last old settler of that well-known section. He had owned a fine farm there at one time, but the river gradually devoured it until now, not one vestige of the farm remains.”

A February 1, 1923, *Platte County Gazette* clipping mentioned the Island next to Parkville: “Parkville may well be proud of one of her most illustrious and energetic citizens, William Brown, commander of the Missouri River ‘Mosquito Fleet’. Mr. Brown has cleaned up the island in front of the depot, turning it from a trash heap into a place of beauty.” Sylvia said this island may not have been “part of the island referred to as ‘Waldron Island’ by Mr. Paxton, but perhaps a remnant of the land on the east side of the bend in the river previous to that time that had been mostly washed away by then.”

As time passed, the island became less recognizable. The Missouri River moved, as it had a habit of doing before the dams were built up-stream and channeled it, so the Island disappeared from maps. But the next time you visit English Landing Park, consider you may be standing on remnants of what was once the mysterious island near Parkville!

CAPTION FOR ATTACHED PHOTOGRAPH:

These two photos, from over a century ago, are from the Fred Brown, ’14, Collection of the Park University Fishburn Archives, Carolyn Elwess, Archivist. They show an island in the Missouri River near Parkville and when pieced together form a panorama of the river and Parkville. “These photos were taken between 1910 and 1914, according to Brown’s handwritten donation notes,” wrote Carolyn.

**“Photo Courtesy of Fishburn Archives, Park University,
Carolyn McHenry Elwess, Archivist.**