

Biographical Sketch of Hononegah & Stephen Mack Jr.

Compiled by Marguerite Olds

Stephen Mack Jr. who was the son of Colonel Stephen, Grandson of Solomon, great grandson of Ebenezer, great, great grandson of John Mack who came from Scotland in 1680, was born February 2, 1798 in Tunbridge, Vermont and died April 10, 1850 at Macktown, Illinois.

Stephen jr. was educated in schools in Vermont and he went to Dartmouth College in New Hampshire in 1813 – 1816. He served as a mercantile apprentice in the city of Boston. In 1816, he followed his father to Detroit, Michigan. Here he was a scout at Ft. Dearbourne in 1817 – 1819. It was while on duty with them that he met some fur traders and learned that the Rock River valley was a fertile land and a good place to establish a trading post. Accordingly, he came west as an agent for the American Fur Company. He traveled with his ponies and arrived at The Rock River near where Janesville, Wisconsin is now. He then followed down the river until he came to an Indian settlement then known as “Turtle Village”, near the present Beloit, Wisconsin junction at Turtle Creek. Here he learned of the friendly Winnebago Indian camp at Bird’s Grove, and started out to find it from the directions he gathered from the tribe, but taking the wrong trail, he went on down the river until he finally reached a Pottowatomie Indian village at Grand Detour, Illinois. Here he located for two or three years (1820 – 1822), trading with the Indians, taking their furs in exchange for his articles of traffic, and carrying his merchandise to and from Chicago on the backs of his ponies.

While living here, he contracted a fever, and was nursed back to health by the Chief’s daughter, “Homomegah”, and later married her by an Indian ceremony. He gave the Chief two fine horses and saddles, and two blankets for Hononegah. In later years, he married her again legally, and by a Justice of the Peace. The Chief wanted his daughter to marry Big Eagle, but he was no good, and drank too much fire water, and Hononegah would not marry him. Her older sister “Little Bird” had married a bad brave named “Grey Fox”, who drank too much, and made Little Bird very unhappy, so Hononegah wanted nothing to do with that type of brave.

Mack’s relation with the Pottowatomie tribe was not productive of the best of feeling, and though he had taken the Chief’s daughter for his wife, still his life was in danger, because he refused to sell firearms and liquor to the braves of the tribe. During one of his trips to Chicago with three of his ponies, a plan was matured with Grey Fox as the instigator, to dispose of him on his return, and to take possession of his affects. Hononegah learning of their intentions was on the lookout for her husbands return, and meeting him far out from the camp, apprised him of his danger. It was but quick work for her to mount one of the ponies, and together they started out for the Winnebago Indian village in Bird’s Grove, which is now Hononegah park, near Rockton, Illinois. They were welcomed by the tribe of Indians and promised protection. It became their home for a number of years, 1822 – 1834. Some of their many children were born here. Mack had a trading post and traded with the Indians as well as with the white men who came to the country looking for good land. A trader’s license was issued to Mack, on Rock River, October 20, 1823, and again September 6, 1824, and October 5, 1826.

The Winnebago village Chief was called Chief Hopcqua. He was a great friend of Stephen.

When Stephen and Hononegah were married, they lived in a log cabin that was situated on the bank of the river at Grand Detour, that Stephen had bought from a French trader named “Satallier”. Hononegah’s comment on the cabin was that it was a large room for many children. This was also Mack’s trading post. They lived there until going to Bird’s Grove. Stephen had to teach Hononegah that she was to sit at the table with him and that he was to cut the wood and bring it in.

Hononegah was a great asset to Stephen. She was a very faithful wife, and devoted woman. She was largely absorbed in the care of her home and children, save when sickness of the early settlers called for her kind and skillful care and attention. Then with her supply of nature's remedies, she would seek out the afflicted and bring sunshine and relief to many a suffering soul who fell prey to the ills of a new country. The high tribute of respect to Mack's Indian wife was genuine and sincere, and although of dusty hue, she possessed a noble soul and did all she could to make those around her comfortable and happy. Not only in sickness were her many virtues shown in a marked degree, but the poor and destitute around her, incident to the struggles of many an early settler, shared of her provisions in many a generous way, and manner. She delighted in doing good. Only once was she known to assume the garb of the paleface sisters and then it was by request of some friends, but she felt so ill at ease and afraid to make herself conspicuous, she soon laid it aside and forever after was content with the costume of her tribe. She was very skillful in ornamenting her clothing. She made herself for extra occasions dresses of fine broadcloth with borders five inches deep all around the skirts, worked in with various ribbons. Her taste in blending colors to have a pleasing effect was very fine, and her needle almost perfect. Articles about her home bore witness of her handicraft.

When she had her first child, she went into the forest alone. She would not let Stephen help her. When her relative from Grand Detour came to visit, which was quite often, she would dress herself in her best garments and visit their tents, and for a brief time be a child of nature again.

In a letter to one of his sisters, Stephen states, "My wife died of bilious fever. She was sick eight or nine days, and died. She died a Christian, and also lived one, not by profession, but by her every act, her every deed proclaimed her a follower of Christ. In her, the hungry and the naked have lost a benefactor, the sick, a nurse, and I have lost a friend who taught me to reverence God by doing good to his creatures."

Hononegah died of a fever at child birth, in July 1847, and her baby died also. She left nine children of which one was only a year old. One other child had died in infancy.

After her death, the youngest daughter was ill with a cold. In a letter to his sister, Stephen stated that he was learning to nurse, that the oldest daughter, "Rosa", kept house and as soon as school was out, Mary and Louisa would help.

Stephen was living in peace and quietude with the Indians at the breaking out of the Blackhawk war. After the battle of Stillman Valley, when the renowned Chief Blackhawk visited the Winnebago Tribe to induce them to follow him on his journey northward. Mack used his influence against such a movement, and although Blackhawk was very angry with the white trader, the little tribe remained on their old camping ground, and the great chief marched on without them. It is said that the feeling was so strong against Mack during the visit of Blackhawk, that the chief of the Winnebago Tribe advised Mack to go away for a time for personal safety. Accordingly he privately went to an island, now called Webber's Island, where he was supplied with food by his faithful wife until it was safe for him to return. Stephen decided to help his own people in the Indian war, and accordingly left the trading post, and as soon as he left the Sock Indians took possession of it, but were prevented from injuring him by the Winnebago Indians. He went to Ft. Dearbourne and joined with them in the war. He spoke, in a letter to his sister, of their force not being large enough to they could not save many families from massacre. In accordance with a treaty made with General Scott, in Rock Island in the fall of 1832, which was officially done by the war department at a cost to the government of \$50,000.00. In speaking of this outlay of government funds, Mack used to say that he could have done the job for ten thousand. Several roving bands of Indians remained in the state for years afterwards, but they had no fixed place of abode.

Mack's home, for three years or more, before going to Pecatonic (Macktown), was called the Bradley place in Bird's Grove.

With the indication of a speedy settlement of the Rock River valley, Mack conceived the idea that the bluff at the mouth of Pecatonica River would be a good place to locate a town in view of river navigation, and was in correspondence with Mr. Bradstreet, of Albany, New York, on the advent of the first white settlers in 1835. It was considered that the Pecatonica River was navigable for one hundred miles from its mouth and the Rock River one hundred and fifty miles up into the territory of Wisconsin. With this large prospect in view, the mouth of the Pecatonica River was a very desirable location for a town. Accordingly Mack took possession of this tract of land (1100 acres), in the fall of 1835, and permanently resided there until his death in 1850. The settlement took the name of Pecatonica at first, but was changed to Macktown on account of a superstition. In an act of the Legislature of the session of 1846 – 1847, part of the settlement took the name of Rockton, through the efforts of Thomas Talcott. Part of this settlement still retains the name of Macktown. It was a very flourishing settlement for a number of years, although there is nothing left now but the Mack home and the Whitman Trading Post. Mack had his town plotted as he owned all of section twenty-three south of Pecatonica River and he sold many lots. In the height of his prosperity he valued a corner lot near the store at \$1,000.00. When told that his land was too uneven for a town, he said, "It is far better than the town of Milwaukee."

He built first, his store, then many houses. In 1839, he built his home. It was a show place at the time it was built, having many characteristics that no other house had this side of Chicago. The foundation was the first stone one in the county and also it was painted, which was a luxury. He established a ferry across the Rock River about 1838, and it was run for a time by William Hulin, who married Merrill Mack's wife, ten years after Merrill's death. Mr. Hulin became quite a prominent man in the county, in later years. This ferry was then bought by Jessie Blinn and carried on by him until the building of the bridge by Mack, which was licensed under regulations of the county commissioners court, which allowed the ferryman to charge for a wagon and two horses, 62 ½ cents, a single wagon and one horse 37 ½ cents, man on a horse 25 cents, and each footman 6 ½ cents. A ferryman who exceeded these charges was liable to have his license revoked for which he had paid ten dollars. In 1842 – 1843, Mack built a bridge in the place of the ferry, mostly at his own expense. This was the first bridge across the Rock River in the state. After going through various stages of repairs from damages by ice and floods, it was entirely carried away in the great flood of June 1, 1857, and was never rebuilt, as another bridge had been previously established a mile farther down the river, which so changed the course of travel, that Macktown was left so far to one side of the road that its growth was greatly retarded. At Rockton, with its developed waterpower, began to grow, Macktown correspondingly began to decline in prosperity. Many buildings were taken down and moved across the river to add to the general growth of Rockton.

Stephen Mack was a man who had received a good education, and possessed a large share of executive ability. He took an active part in the formation of the new country and its development. By Indian treaty stipulation with the government, half-breed children had a certain amount of land or its equivalent in money. By settlement with a government commissioner, Mack received about \$5,000.00 on account of his children by his Indian wife. This amount of money, at that early day, enabled him to employ men and make a good deal of improvements, and to possess, himself, of a large quantity of land. He also loaned money to many an early settler to enter his land. At the time of his death, he owned, besides his large Macktown farm, land in section twenty-six, and all of section twenty-eight, south of the Pecatonica River, amounting, in all, to about one thousand acres. On the latter tract, he had built a house and established a dairy farm, which was run by a man named Stocker. A son of this man married Mack's daughter "Mary", and Mack's son married Julia Stocker.

Mack kept the first store and was patronized by the first settlers as well as by the Indians, bringing goods from Chicago on Indian ponies before the advent of the wagons. This traffic must have been profitable in those days. In later years, he associated his cousin, Merrill E. Mack, with him in his store. This enabled Mack to work on other enterprises. Merrill did not handle Mack's money very efficiently, and at his death, left many debts. In one of Mack's letters to his sister, he stated

that he had lost \$2,000.00 by befriending his cousin, and taking him in as a partner, as he had made bad use of his funds, and when he died, his widow grasped everything, went home, leaving Mack to pay the bills. In another letter to his sister shortly after, he wrote that he had suffered a considerable loss in fire. A house belonging to him had the upper story entirely burned off. The lower part was saved by the exertions of his neighbors. The house contained four tenements, one a cabinet shop, one occupied by a family, one a storage for grain, and the other a school, where the fire started in the heating stove.

In 1838, the first steamer called "The Gypsy" came up the river. Mack put a stake out for it to tie up to, and George Stevens, who lived across the river, did the same, and the steamer tied up to Stevens stake. That night, there was a dance on the boat, which was loaded with flour. There were so many people that the boat sank in the water deeper than it should have, so that the flour got wet, and was ruined.

In order to arrest any questions as to the legality of his marriage, and to make his children full heirs, in law, Stephen and Hononegah were remarried on September 14, 1840, by William Hulin, Justice of the Peace.

In a letter written April 4, 1841, Mack stated that a funeral had been held at his house, the first white person to be buried in Pecatonic, although it had been settled six hears, and contained over two hundred inhabitants.

Mack was elected Associate Justice in 1849, and held the office as long as he lived. He was appointed the first township treasurer of the school fund, and at this time, Walt Talcott, Henry O. Brown, and William Halley were the township trustees. On the adoption of the township organization in 1850, Mack was a candidate for the first supervisor, but was defeated by a few votes by his rival Sylvester Talcott.

After the death of his Indian wife in July 1847, Mack married Mrs. Daniels, who lived near Harrison, Illinois. She was a widow of forty hears of age, being ten years younger than Mack. She was a native of Pennsylvania, residing with her husband, Mr. Daniels, on the river Rouge, in Michigan, where he died. She moved near Rockton; Harrison, with her family of seven sons and one daughter. Her youngest son was five years old when she married Mack, and he made his home with them. The rest of the children kept house for themselves, and resided six miles from Stephen's home. The oldest sons were in the military business, and had some property and were able to care for the younger ones. Stephen, as he said in one of his letters to his sister, entered into this marriage solely with a view to the benefit of his children, because there was a vacancy that hired help could not fill. His children wanted a councilor, a guide, and a mother. He found a good and careful mother for his children, and an affectionate companion for himself.

Mack died suddenly on the tenth of April 1850, and was buried on his farm beside his Indian wife, who had been so faithful a companion for so many years. The small plot was surrounded by a fence. Thirty years later, when the graves were sadly neglected, they were removed to the Phillips cemetery, near Harrison by some of Mack's friends. An extract from the Rockton Herald, on May 21, 1880, will explain the transaction.

"The remains of Mack and his Indian wife Hononegah, were removed Wednesday from where they were buried on the Mack farm thirty years ago, and interned in the Phillips Cemetery in District No. 7. The bones were in a good state of preservation, even the hair and a comb of Mrs. Mack were little changed, but the coffins were badly decayed as to easily crumble to pieces when disturbed. It is intended to erect a suitable stone to commemorate their remains. A glass bottle was deposited with the remains containing the printed paper as follows. "If, in the course of time, this paper should meet the eye of any person, be it known that the remains buried here are those of

Stephen Mack and his Indian wife Hononegah." The remains of Henry Clay Mack, a son who died when he was eight years of age, was interned with his father and mother."

In 1965, the remains were again interned and moved to farmland of Stephen Mack and near the house that he built in 1839, which now is a museum.

Mack was inclined to be non-communicative concerning his personal history. He left no records or diaries or pictures. One history relates that Mack bought lots seven and eight in block forty-three in the original town of Chicago, on September 29, 1830, for \$53.00. The block is now near the center of the city.

Macktown deteriorated after Mack's death. Many houses were moved to Rockton. Farmer's rented Mack's land, house, and farm, until in 1927, Macktown was sold to the Winnebago County and became a Forest Preserve. Mack's house was the caretaker's home. In 1950, the home was to be torn down to make room for a new and modern home for the caretaker, but a petition was presented with seven hundred residents signing, to the supervisors, and Mary Graham made a good speech, giving all the reasons for saving the home. It was decided to leave the house standing and build the caretakers home in another location.

The Rockton Township Historical Society was formed and a Museum made of the Mack House, which was opened to the public for the first time on June 24, 1956. Now, in 1968, the Mack house is well filled with articles of the past, and the Trading Post that was built by Mr. Whitman during the years of 1841 to 1846, is a very interesting place to visit, as it is as near authentic as is possible to make it in these days.

Here is the close of the brief sketch of Stephen Mack jr. In many respects, he was a remarkable man. Born of sturdy New England parentage, cradled among the green mountain state, his youthful spirit struggled for a larger scope than the narrow environments of his humble home. What could have prompted a man of his ability to hide away so many years from civilization may never be know. It may have been that through keen foresight he had caught a glimpse of the wonderful development of the west, and he wanted to be first to see the rising sun of civilization and prosperity spread all over the great prairies. How far his great aspirations were realized cannot be told, yet he succeeded in being a man of prominence in his time, and his name will be handed down in the annuals of Rockton as a man of many virtues, of integrity and unquestionable honesty of purpose.

We know he was a busy man, but a lonesome one, by the reading his letters to his sisters. He begged them to come and see him. He proudly wrote to them that his cousins Calvin and Orlin Mack had visited with them. He offered any of his relatives, land if they would come and live near him, and said that he would have work for them.

Stephen died in 1850, a man who had lived a full life in his fifty-two years.