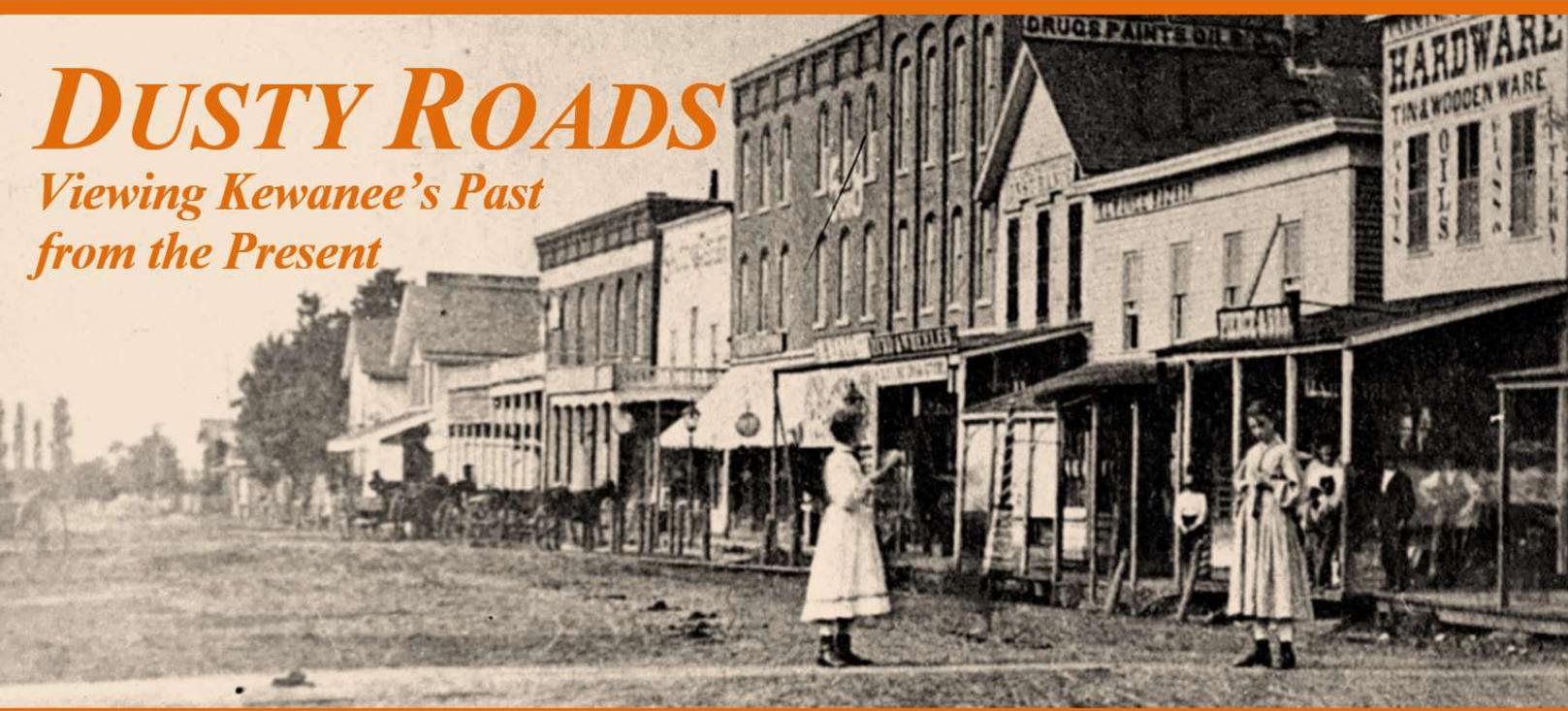


DUSTY ROADS

*Viewing Kewanee's Past
from the Present*



by Dean Karau

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The John Kilvington Family: The Original Pioneers of European Descent in Kewanee-Wethersfield

They Arrived in 1836 and Hosted the Founders of Wethersfield

We all have heard the story of how Wethersfield was founded in 1836 by the Connecticut Association of Wethersfield, Connecticut. But there were other settlers of European descent in the area before the Association, including the first family to settle in the Kewanee-Wethersfield area, the first true pioneer family.

John Kilvington was born in England around 1795. He may have been a customs and excise officer in Liverpool at the time of his marriage to Elizabeth, born in about 1780. John and Elizabeth had at least one child, Thomas, born in England around 1828.

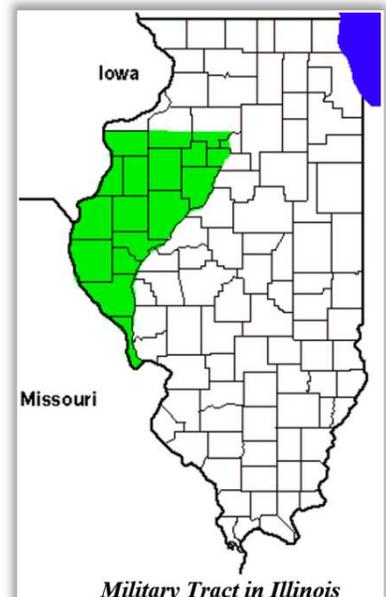
Sometime after Thomas' birth, the family, along with Robert Coultas, Elizabeth's son from a previous marriage, emigrated to North America.

By the mid-1830s, the Kilvingtons and Coultas were living in what later became Bureau County, around Indiantown, named for a former Pottawattamie village. Autuckee, the principal chief of the Pottawattamies, had lived there but, between 1832 and 1836, as white settlements in the area increased, the Pottawattamie moved to government-

assigned land in western Kansas. Indiantown and Windsor, founded at the same time, later merged to become Tiskilwa.

In the spring of 1836, 41 year-old John, 56 year-old Elizabeth, 8 year-old Thomas, and 23 year-old Coultas, decided to move from Indiantown. The reason for the move is unclear.

Before Illinois was admitted to the Union, Congress set aside a vast part of public land in Illinois for veterans of the War of 1812. The Military Tract lay between the Illinois and Mississippi Rivers and extended northward as far as a line drawn from the "Great Bend" in the



Illinois River westward to the Mississippi River.

Any veteran could have a free quarter section of land in the Tract, but many who came found the hardships of frontier life unappealing. So many veterans sold or bartered their land, often to Eastern “land sharks.”

As a result, non-veteran pioneers had difficulty determining the legal status of land they settled on - did it belong to a land shark who would turn up to extract exorbitant amounts for the settler to keep the settler’s now-developed land? That was an issue for those living around Indiantown in the mid-1830s.

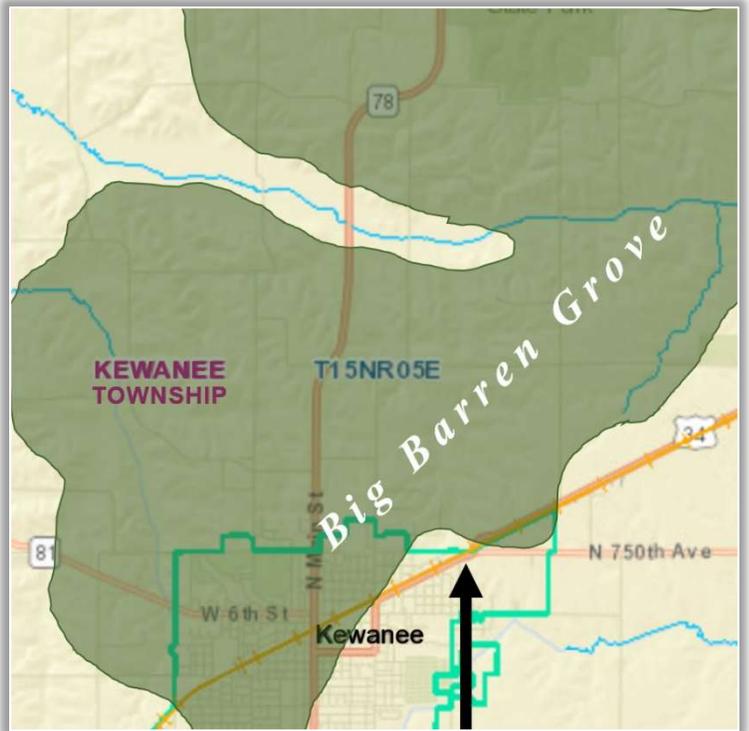
John Kilvington and his family could well have left Indiantown merely to relocate to better land to the west. But it’s also possible – even likely - that the family was forced to move by a land shark.

In the spring of 1836, the Kilvingtons and Coultas began a trek westward, traveling through land which E. F. Wells, whose father settled in the area in 1838, described for us:

“The intervening space [between groves of trees] and for many miles beyond each settlement, were an unbroken waste . . . [t]he roads by which the settlers occasionally passed from one grove to another were faint trails, sometimes almost overgrown and hidden by the luxuriant grass of the prairie. And the sloughs, as the feeble water courses were called, were unbridged, so that in the spring season or time of heavy rains many of them were impassible.”

About twenty miles west of Tiskilwa, the Kilvington family happened upon Federal land that met at least three important criteria: reasonably clear prairie on which to farm, reasonable access to timber, and reasonable access to water. They stopped at the edge of the Big Barren Grove.

Big Barren Grove was six miles wide and fifteen miles long, a hardwood forest across undulating hills, stretching diagonally from what became Annawan Township, over most of what became Kewanee Township, and dipping slightly into what became Wethersfield Township. It offered logs for a home, wood for fenceposts, and firewood. The prairie to the south provided land on which to start a farm, while the west fork of the Spoon River and nearby springs offered water.



Kilvington Homestead

The Kilvingtons claimed a quarter section of land, began cutting timber for a primitive log dwelling and planted crops for food. By the fall of 1836, the family had finished the building and began preparing for a winter on the prairie, again described by Wells:

“In the somber hue of winter, the solitude, the immensity of these plains, the absence of every symbol of habitation, or of the presence of man, might, like the sea, inspire emotions of reverence and awe; but in the time of winter they were the scene of many fatalities. When night and the storm came down upon the waste the faint trail was soon hidden, and the traveler, losing all sense of direction, would sometimes perish in his benighted wanderings, even within the call of his own home.”

The Kilvingtons soon had guests.

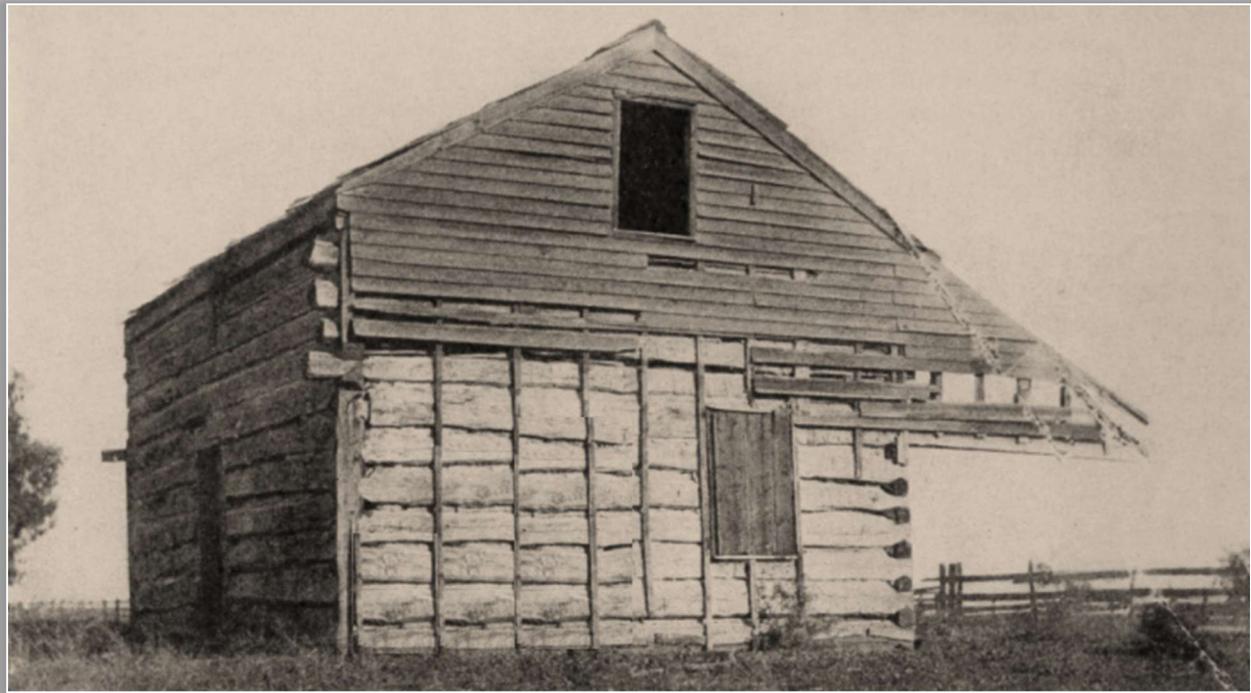
In late February, 1836, three men were dispatched by the Connecticut Association of Wethersfield to Illinois to purchase land. By May, they had set up camp in Big Barren Grove near the Kilvington family while they were making the purchases.

After those first three men returned to Connecticut, another party was sent to survey the land and layout a town plat. They arrived in November and again stayed with the Kilvington family until late in the month, at which time all but

John F. Willard returned to Connecticut. Willard stayed with the Kilvingtons for two weeks while walking two miles each day to build a cabin in the nearby land around the newly-laid-out Wethersfield.

The 1840 Federal Census showed that John, Elizabeth, and Thomas continued to develop and farm the land while Coultas began working in “manufacture and trades.” The 1850 Census showed

Below is an early 20th century photograph showing a dwelling on Kilvington property, in the south-east quarter of Section 27 in Kewanee Township. The dwelling may have been the original Kilvington home, but it also could have been a later-constructed building. The Galva News reported in 1940 that traces of a foundation on Kilvingtons’ former land were still visible near the Highway 34 viaduct. At this time, there seems to be no additional information



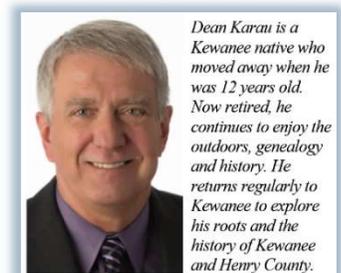
the Kilvington family continuing to farm, while Robert had married and was now farming on his own. Unfortunately, Coultas died in 1854 of a gunshot wound suffered in a hunting accident.

John Kilvington became a naturalized United States citizen in 1856, and the 1860 Federal Census showed he and Elizabeth continuing to farm in Kewanee. Elizabeth died on December 13, 1863, and was buried in the original Wethersfield Cemetery.

On February 25, 1864, John married Fanny Potter, born about 1796 in England. But on April 11, 1864, shortly after his second marriage, John died and was buried along with Elizabeth in the Wethersfield Cemetery. He left his entire estate to his new wife, Fanny, in a will executed shortly before his death.

about the Kilvington homestead or the location of the dwelling(s).

For the most part, John Kilvington and his family have been given short-shrift for their role in the founding of our hometown. They became the first residents of what was to become today’s Kewanee, arriving before the founding of Wethersfield and long before the founding of Berrien, later renamed Kewanee. Perhaps now John and Elizabeth Kilvington - and Robert Coultas - can have a short moment of recognition for their contributions as the original Kewanee pioneer family.



Dean Karau is a Kewanee native who moved away when he was 12 years old. Now retired, he continues to enjoy the outdoors, genealogy and history. He returns regularly to Kewanee to explore his roots and the history of Kewanee and Henry County.