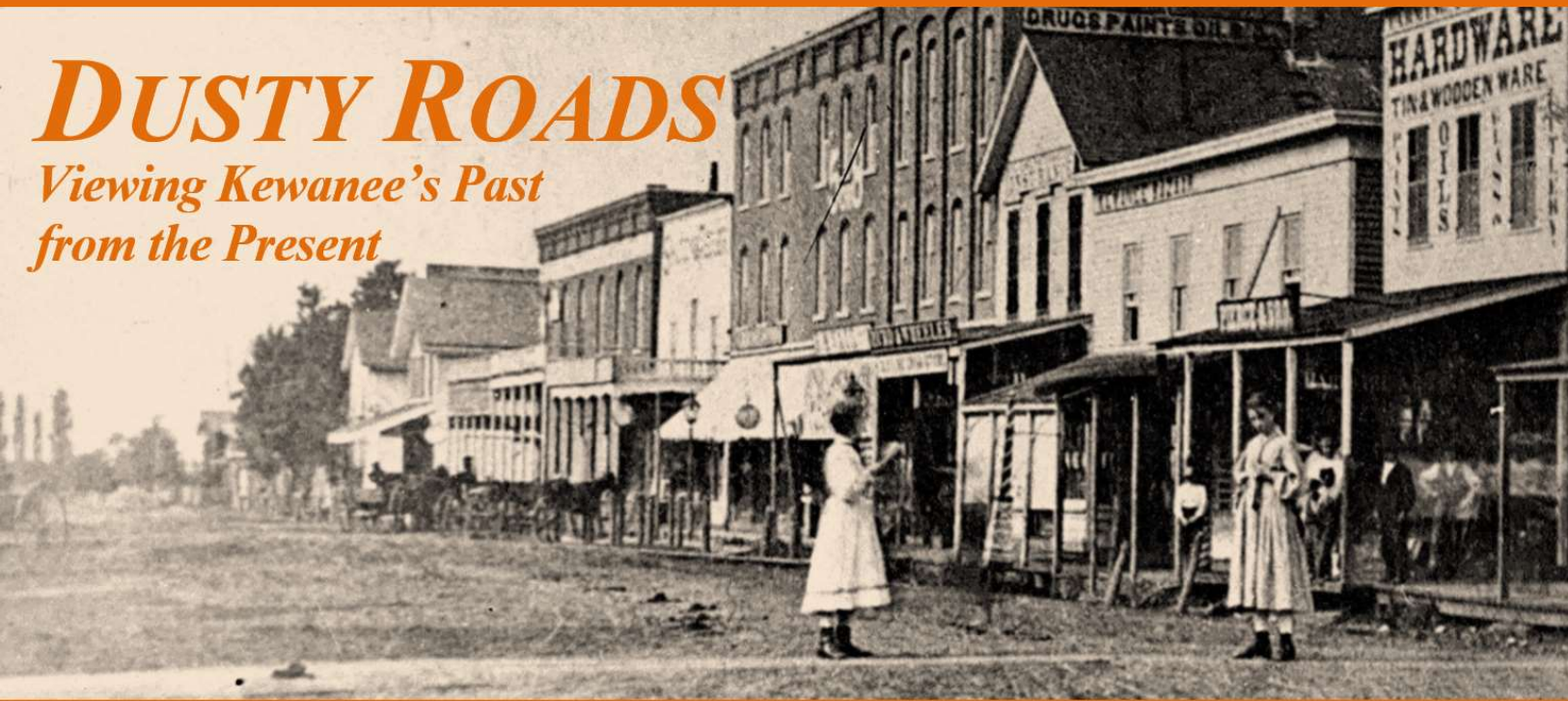


# DUSTY ROADS

Viewing Kewanee's Past  
from the Present



by Dean Karau

December 2019

## Wethersfield Was Almost a Part of Coffee County

But Its Sturdy Pioneers Worked to Kill a Legislative Bill and Turn It Into “Cold Coffee”

You live in Wethersfield, want to get married, and so you travel to the Coffee County courthouse in Toulon to obtain your marriage license.

What's up with that?

Well, if some citizens of Knox and Putnam Counties in 1837 had had their way, that's exactly where you'd go to conduct any county business today.

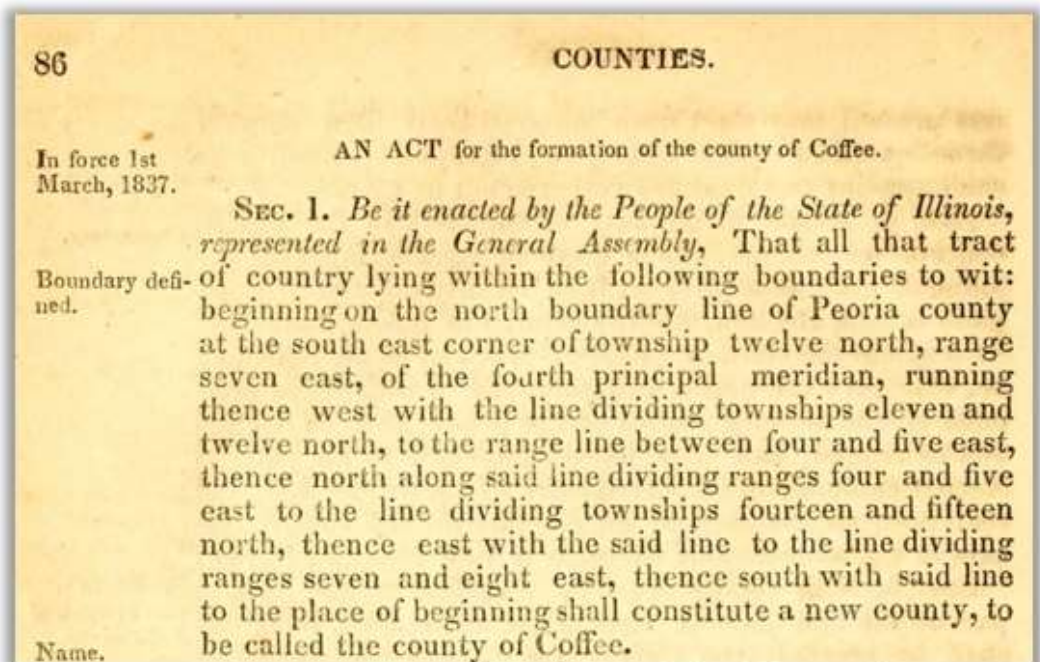
But Wethersfield's pioneers, in addition to the many other hardships they had to face in their new colony, rose up to prevent that from happening. For better or worse.

Here's the inside story.

Henry County was established in 1825 by the United States government. But it was over ten years before the first settlement in the county was established,

and over 12 years before the county was organized.

At the time of the founding of Wethersfield in 1836, neither Stark County nor Bureau County existed. To Wethersfield's east lay Putnam County and to its south Knox County. Folks living at the far ends of those counties had to travel long distances,



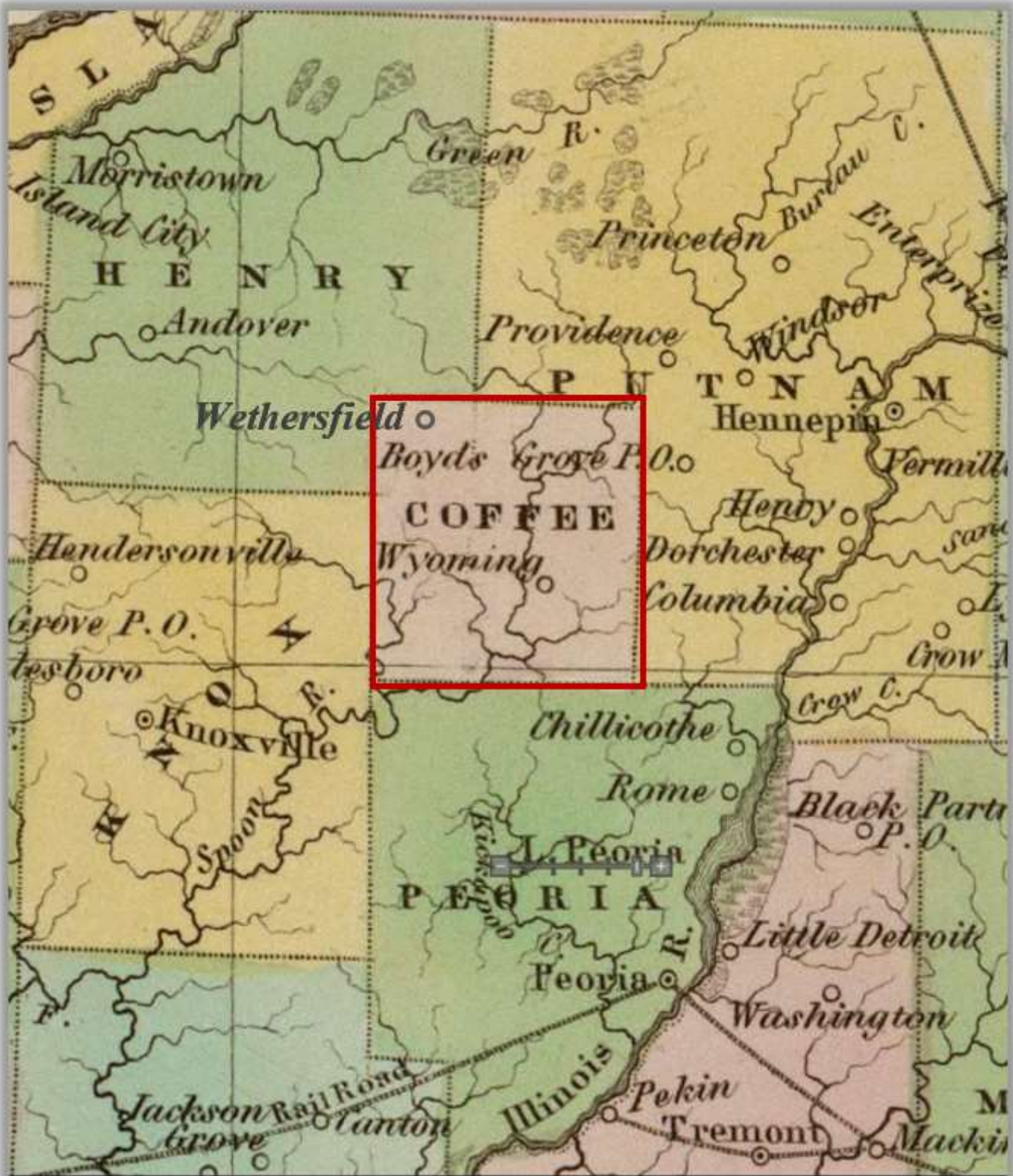
First section of 1837 Act for the creation of Coffee County



for some 30 miles or more, to the respective county seats, Knoxville and Hennepin, to conduct county business.

So a committee of interested Knox and Putnam County citizens traveled to Vandalia, then the state capital, to ask the legislature to create a new county, to be named Coffee County. One of the

leaders of those citizens was Colonel William H. Henderson, father of well-known General Thomas J. Henderson. Col. Henderson, very familiar with the legislative process from his time spent in Tennessee, succeeded in convincing the legislators to act. Thus, in March 1837, the Illinois state legislature passed an act creating Coffee County.



*Proposed Coffee County on a map drawn in 1837*

The proposed new county was to be formed by taking two Knox County townships, one Henry County township, and the rest from Putnam County. The new county's borders were identical to today's Stark County, except that it contained one more township, Wethersfield Township. But the act was subject to the approval of Knox and Henry counties

The act took Wethersfield and Henry County by surprise. Quickly Henry County residents organized committees to draft a petition against the act. Henry G. Little, one of the committee members, recalls the efforts made against the act:

*“As a member of one of those committees I well remember the week or ten days of hard work which I put in in the saddle riding from house to house and from town to town. In my district in Henry county every man I saw signed the [petition]. But my hardest work was in Knox county, which I canvassed thoroughly in company of Wm. Dunbar, of Lafayette. The citizens*

*of Knox county were not agreed. Those in the eastern part of the county generally favored the organization of a new county as that would bring the new county seat nearer to them than was Knoxville. Still, we succeeded in inducing enough men to sign our [petition] to kill the bill and Coffee county was cold coffee indeed.”*

In his later years, Henry Little could recall with satisfaction his own wearisome efforts in helping keep Wethersfield Township in Henry County.

But the concept of a new county did not evaporate, and in 1839, the legislature formed Stark County, providing that the county seat should be called “Toulon” (although at the time only a single cabin had been built at the designated location).

So thanks to Henry Little and other like-minded pioneers, Wethersfield citizens now travel about 21 miles to Cambridge, rather than about 10 miles to Toulon, to conduct their county business. For better or worse.



*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.*