

The Historic 1840 Berry Tavern

By Cory Ritterbusch

Built in 1840, situated in Lafayette County, Wisconsin, two miles south of Shullsburg and four miles north of Scales Mound, Illinois, the Fortunatus Berry Tavern is one of two remnants of the once thriving lead mining community of Gratiot's Grove.

In 1827 New Yorker Fortunatus Berry moved his family from Springfield, Illinois to the Gratiot settlement locating at the site of the current Tavern. In 1829 he opened a log roadhouse at what was called Berry's Grove. This was one of the first in the unsettled region, a "house of entertainment" taking in travelers, offering salt pork, straw pillow, along with hard cider and corn whiskey. A polling place for the first elections, it served as seat of government, where settlers met May 1832 to plan Black Hawk War defenses, electing Berry captain of the infantry company assigned to Fort Gratiot.

The Berry Tavern was popular hangout for thirsty miners, hostel for weary travelers, home for growing family, but also sometime schoolhouse and post office, one of the first such commissioned in what was to become the Wisconsin Territory. Postmaster Berry was elected County Supervisor.

When the Chicago to Galena stage line extended service to Shullsburg, Berry decided to build a new wood frame hotel, complete with livery stable, bar and dining rooms, dance hall and seven guest rooms – as the Berry Tavern stands today. At a well-attended "ball" in early 1842 a young tough from Kentucky – drunk and brandishing a pistol – shot a man through the heart, cousin of host Adeline Berry. The assailant escaped, but captured, tried and condemned to death, he was hanged before a crowd of five thousand at Mineral Point – one of the last Wisconsin executions. Famously, his spirit haunts Mineral Point's Walker House today.

A decade later cholera spread from rail camp to stage line to the Berry Tavern, now called the Lamar Hotel, killing eleven guests and family within days. With doctor and coffin builder amongst the dead, bodies were wrapped in gunny sacks and stacked in the still-standing stone root cellar awaiting burial. Six additional travelers and stage drivers died following stops at the hotel. On the property today is a cholera victims cemetery.

The Berry Tavern is one of the oldest buildings in Wisconsin and the region. When stagecoach gave way to rail and then later auto, when lead mines closed, the old Berry Tavern became a farmhouse. Refashioned to new purpose, it still retains its original white oak beams, pine floors and stonewalls. In 1915 a monument was placed there by the Daughters of the American Revolution to honor its place in history.

The Berry Tavern has been part of all phases of the area's history – pioneer lead mining, the Black Hawk War, early post office and school, early stop along the stagecoach trail, dairy farming, industrial lead mining and, until recently, part of modern agriculture – all the while retaining its original integrity with the hotel and stone root cellar intact.

As so many landmarks have disappeared, in 2013 the Berry Tavern was purchased for preservation and the Friends of Berry Tavern was established to preserve this historical treasure for future generations.

The Berry Tavern:

- One of earliest taverns/inns in the region
- Central place in drama of the Black Hawk War
- One of earliest post offices in Wisconsin Territory
- One of first schools in the Lead Region
- Site of 1842 murder and eventual hanging
- Popular stop on former stagecoach line

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- Site of 1854 cholera outbreak resulting in 17 deaths
- Located on one the highest points in the area

Donations and Annual Memberships can be sent to:
Friends of Berry Tavern
701 W. Hope St.
Shullsburg, WI 53586