

Riley Root

Pioneer of 1848

compiled by Stephenie Flora and Robert Anderson

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Riley Root

b. 29 Aug 1795 Durham, Greene County, New York

d. 24 Feb 1870 Knox County, Illinois

buried [Hope Cemetery](#), Galesburg, Knox County, Illinois

s/o Thomas and Princess (Noble) Root

m. 07 Oct 1821

Lavinia Butler

b. 09 Apr 1803 Durham, Greene County, New York

d. 25 Jun 1834, Camden, Oneida County, New York

Children of Riley Root and Lavinia Butler:

1.

2. Dency Elizabeth Root (1823-1893)

3.

4. Clarissa Noble Root (1831-1928)

5.

1821: purchased a farm at Camden, New York

1836: moved to Log City, Knox County, Illinois



LOG CITY

Reproduction of a picture painted from memory by Mrs. John G. West.

- | | | |
|------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. Prof. Losey | 5. Mrs. Lyman | 9. Mr. Lewis |
| 2. Nehemiah West | Mr. Farnham | 10. Mr. Colton |
| 3. John West | Mrs. Phelps | 11. Mr. Colton's store |
| L. Conger in the | Mr. Root | 12. Rev. Mr. Gale |
| addition. | (In Succession) | 13. Rev. Mr. Waters |
| 4. Hugh Conger | 6. Mr. Avery | 14. Mr. May |
| | 7. Deacon Goodell | 15. School house in center. |
| | 8. John West and father | |

Log City painted from memory by one of the early inhabitants of Galesburg [Seventy-five Significant Years: The Story of Knox College, 1837-1912]

Riley's cabin is No. 5 also inhabited by Mrs. Phelps who was his widowed sister Clarissa, my 3x great grandmother, & her daughter my 2x great grandmother Seraphina, as well as Riley's 2 daughters.

Riley helped build cabin No. 6 inhabited by my 3x great grandmother Phoebe (Throop) Avery [a niece of Nathan Hale & 4x great grand-daughter of Gov. Bradford of Plymouth Colony] and my 2x great grandfather George Avery. George later helped run the underground railroad station at Galesburg. Two of George's siblings were also in that cabin.

My great grandfather Robert Avery was born in that cabin & pattered around in Riley's workshop as a child [contributed by Robert Anderson]

1840: Knox County, Illinois, Riley Root, 1 male (40-50); 1 female (5-10); 1 female (15-24)

1848: joined company emigrating to Oregon

1849: went to California gold fields

1850: October 21 sailed for Illinois via the Isthmus of Panama to Chagres where he sailed for New Orleans on December 8, leaving New Orleans on the 21st by steamboat to St. Louis arriving December 31. He left St. Louis January 2, 1850 arriving home January 8, 1850 having been gone one year, nine months and five days.

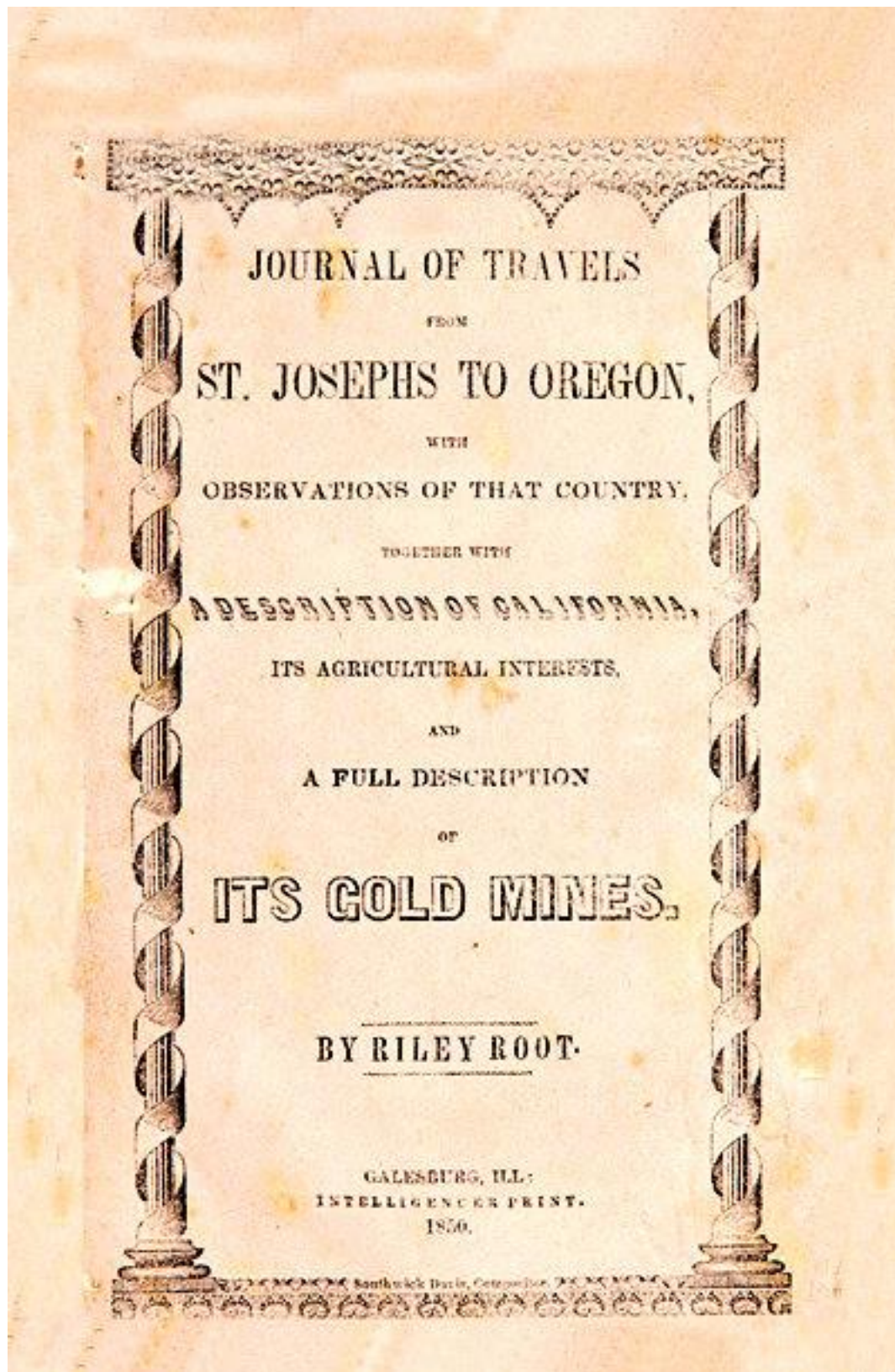
1850: Galesburg, Knox County, Illinois, September 23, 1850; Riley Root, 55, carpenter, \$3000, NY; Clarissa, 17, NY

1855: Galesburg, Knox County, Illinois, State Census, July 3, 1855, 1 male (50-60); 1 female (10-20)

1860: Galesburg, Knox County, Illinois, July 31, 1860, Riley Root, 64, gentleman, \$3000 \$5000, NY; Clarissa, 25, domestic, NY

1870: Galesburg, Knox County, Illinois Mortality Index, Riley Root, 74, wid, NY, February, farmer, typhoid pneumonia

“Riley Root, immigrant enroute from Illinois” [Oregon Spectator, September 7, 1848 p. 3:1]



Copies of original Journal in Huntington and Vale University Coe Collection

In the published journal the actual account of the journey has several entries noting the pronunciation of various geographical names and some additional explanatory notes. The explanation of travel covers pages 1-37; page 38 is blank, pages 39-45 provide "Advice to Emigrants"; page 46 is blank, pages 47-66 provide a "Description of Oregon"; pages 67-70 cover "Indians of Oregon"; pages 71-102 recount the "Wailatpu [Whitman] Massacre"; pages 103-106 describe "Things in Oregon"; pages 107-111 gives and accounting of "Gold Mania aka Yellow Fever"; page 112 is blank, pages 113-131 describes the "California Gold Mines"; pages 132-136 provide a "Description of California"; pages 137-143 covers the return trip to Illinois

April

3 set out from home in Knox County, Illinois, to Nauvoo, Quincy, south to St. Louis and on to St. Joseph

In his journal Root describes St. Joseph as a town consisting of *"1,800 inhabitants, [which] contained 18 stores, 3 drug stores, 9 groceries, 6 tailor shops, 8 blacksmith shops, 2 tin shops, 3 taverns, 3 boarding houses, 1 steam and 1 water flouring mill and 2 steam saw mills"* Its residents included *"15 lawyers, 11 doctors, 2 silversmiths and 2 gunsmiths."*

25 crossed the Missouri River with a party of emigrants bound for Oregon

27 the train was *"organized into a company of 15 or 20 wagons"*

28 Iowa and Sach Mission Boarding School, remained for 3 days

May

3 Nemachaw creek

7 Blue Creek

8 Wyatt fork of Blue Creek

9 Walnut creek or Sandy

10 Little fork of Little Sandy

12 Blue Creek

14 killed first buffalo on Blue River

15 joined by a party

"of a few wagons which had been traveling behind us" and which *"came up and joind our party, making in all about 30 wagons."*

16 Platt River where constant harassment by the Sioux made it necessary to have a pow-wow and bestow gifts in order to continue

18 City du Chein at Plumb Creek

24 Crossing of South fork of Platt

27 Ash Hollow, North Platt

30 Babel Tower

June

1 Chimney Rock. Scotts Bluffs

3 reached Fort Laramie where they laid by for 3 days to rest and recruit stock

"built of sun-dried bricks, with timbers to support the bricks and form the doors and windows, and done in the coarsest manner". Also at the fort at that time were members of the American Fur Company. Root was informed by the Principal at the Fort that *"the Company shipd from Fort Pier, the year 1847,*

more than 80,000 buffalo robes, between 11,000 and 12,000 of which were obtained at Fort Laramie, besides a great amount of other peltry.”

- 7 Black Hills Gap
- 10 Big Timber Creek
- 11 Mike’s Head Creek
- 12 Deer Creek
- 15 Platt crossing

“the Mormons had arrived a few days previous, and prepard a raft for crossing.”

- 17 Willow Spring, Red Buttes, Sweetwater River
- 19 Independence Rock
- 26 Fork of Sweetwater
- 27 South Pass, Table Rock, Pacific Springs
- 28 Little Sandy Creek
- 29 Great Sandy Creek, Greenwoods Cutoff, Cole pit rock
- 30 Green River

July

- 2 Salmon Trout branch
- 4 Ham’s fork
- 6 Bear River w at Smith Fork
- 7 Thomas’ fork of Bear River
- 9 laid over at Bear River with fifteen sick, one of whom died during the day
- 11 Soda Springs
- 12 Portneuf head waters
- 15 Fort Hall, from where the company followed the Snake River on and off for 3 weeks
- 16 Portneuf Crossing
- 18 Cascade Creek, American Falls
- 19 Cassie Creek
- 20 Swamp Creek marsh
- 21 Goose Creek
- 23 Rock Creek
- 25 Warm Spring Creek
- 26 Salmon Falls
- 31 Salt Grass Creek

August

- 1 Grease Wood Creek
- 4 Hot Springs
- 6 Owyhe river, Fort Boise

“Fort Boyce, located in a pleasant place, on the bank of the Snake River.” The stream here was “near a quarter of a mile wide, and the only means of ferrying it, a canoe brought from the Payette, 250 miles” away.

- 8 Malheur River

Going through the scared regions north of Malheur Root stated it was *“fit only for a Hercules to use in leveling off the surface of some planet”* Reflecting on the journey he exclaimed: *“Oh when shall I view once more a verdant landscape! One thousand miles of naked rocks! Landscape without soil: River bottoms with scarcely grass enough to support emigrant teams. Who can but think of his native home and the `old oaken bucket`?”*

- 9 Birch Creek
- 10 Sulphur Creek, Burnt River
- 13 Burnt River north fork
- 14 Lone Pine stump, Powder River Valley

described by Root as *“A delightful Eden—had it soil and were it covered with luxuriant grasses.”*

- 15 Powder River west branch
- 16 Grande Ronde Valley

Reaching the Grand Ronde Valley the company found that the Indians has set fires and a heavy haze hung over the route from Powder River to Grande Ronde. *“The air so smoky that we can see but a short distance.”*

- 17 Grande Ronde river
- 18 Blue Mountains
- 19 Lee’s Encampment
- 20 Umatilla River, Mount Prospect
- 23 Alder Creek, Whitman’s cutoff
- 24 Well Spring

“Following down the Umatilla, the company nooned “on the battleground of the 24th of February, between Oregon soldiers and the Cayuse Indians.”

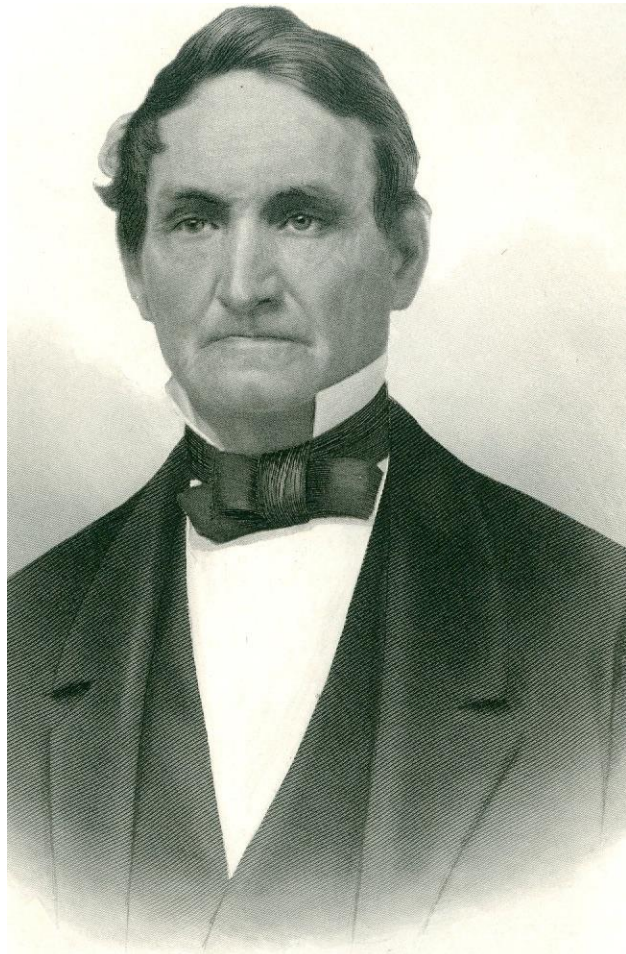
- 25 Quesnell’s Creek
- 28 John Day’s River, Beaver fork of John Day’s River
- 31 Deschutes River where two days were spent calking the wagons and ferrying the river.

September

- 3 Barlow’s Gate
- 6 Deshutes Valley, Palmer’s Cabin
- 8 Laurel Hill
- 9 Muddy fork of Sandy
- 10 Devil’s backbone
- 11 Sandy Creek

“first settlement at the west foot of the Cascades” was reached

- 13 Oregon City



Riley Root

[History of Knox county, Illinois p. 1121]

RILEY ROOT.

In the history of the pioneers of Knox county it is imperative that mention be made of Riley Root who arrived at Log City in the latter part of July, 1836. From that time forward until his death he was closely associated, save for a brief period, with the development and progress of this part of the state. His talents were varied and along many lines he displayed more than ordinary ability. He was an inventor whose ideas have become practical in mechanical circles, and he possessed talents of seemingly diverse nature in that he was a musician of considerable skill and ability. His impress for good was also felt along many other lines and Galesburg has reason to honor him as one of her worthy and valued early settlers. He was born at Durham, Greene county, New York, August 29, 1795, and passed away February 24, 1870. He was descended from good old Anglo-Saxon stock, his ancestry being traced back directly to John Root who emigrated to America from Badby, England, in the year 1630. Ten years later he married Miss Mary Kilbourne who came to America in 1635. They settled in Farmington, Connecticut, and became the progenitors of the family whose representatives for many generations continued to reside in New England. Thomas Root, the father of Riley Root, was born in Westfield, Massachusetts, September 25, 1765, and died at Camden, New York, January 22, 1826. He was married in Westfield, Massachusetts, February 10, 1791, to Princess Noble, who was born in Westfield, May 8, 1766, and died at Camden, New York, April 5, 1830. At the time of their marriage they removed to Durham, Greene county, New York, where Thomas Root purchased a farm on which he resided until 1821. He then bought land in Camden and removed to that place where he and his wife continued to reside until called to their final rest. They were the parents of five children, Roland, Mrs. Clarissa Phelps, Riley, Reuben and Royal.

Riley Root early developed traits of character that foreshadowed upright purpose and honorable manhood. He remained with his parents upon the home farm through the period of his youth and his educational advantages were somewhat limited but he attended the district school as opportunity offered.

This however, did not satisfy his thirst for knowledge. So anxious was he to increase his fund of information that, in an age when books were very scarce he kept a dictionary on the mantel and utilized every spare moment in poring over its pages. He thus stored his mind with many valuable bits of knowledge and such was his mental power that he was able to systematize these and use the information at will. In early youth he was a pupil in the Westfield (Mass.) Academy for a time, there preparing for teaching and also pursuing a course in surveying. For many years he taught school and displayed particular ability in imparting readily and clearly to others the knowledge he had acquired. In 1821 he purchased a farm at Camden, New York, and resided thereon until 1836 but spent much time in the interim in surveying in addition to performing the work of the fields. In 1835, when a company was organized for the purpose of building a college town in what was then considered the far west, he became one of the number and in the latter part of July, 1836, arrived at Log City, Knox county, Illinois. Possessing expert mechanical ability he aided in erecting the first house in Galesburg and also assisted largely in the building of the old First church. In 1837 he procured some big stones and at his own fireside, with the aid of only a small chisel and hammer, he shaped these into millstones. Then in company with another, he erected a horse-power gristmill, and thus furnished the only means for the colonists within a radius of fifty miles to get their grain ground until a waterpower mill, known as Olmstead's mill, near Monmouth, was erected. He continued an active factor in the work of progress and development here until April, 1848, when, in company with others, he traveled in a train of twenty-five wagons drawn by oxen, overland for Oregon, arriving at his destination in the autumn. In the following spring he went to California where gold had just been discovered. He remained for some time searching for the precious metal but ill health forced him to return home and taking the route via the Isthmus of Panama and New Orleans he arrived in Knox county on the 8th of January, 1850, being the first man to return from the gold fields of California. Upon his return he wrote a book concerning his travels, giving a graphic account of the trip and a description

of the processes of mining gold on the Pacific coast. He possessed considerable literary ability and in 1866 he wrote a treatise on musical philosophy and made a keyboard to illustrate the transposition of the scale. He was very fond of music and during his later years devoted much time to the study of the art. He was recognized as a musician of much more than ordinary skill although he shrank from appearing in public as an interpreter of the art. With only the simple tools at his command he made, working at his own fireside a violin of such excellent tone and quality that it was purchased by one of Galesburg's leading musicians. His skill along mechanical lines was variously shown and he gave to the world a number of valuable inventions. In 1857 he secured a patent for the first rotary fan blower—a machine for clearing the snow from the railroad tracks. The device proved successful beyond his expectations, but through lack of funds he was unable to demonstrate its usefulness to the skeptical public and the officials of the new railroad enterprise who could not grasp the importance of such a machine. The patent therefore was allowed to expire. Later the efficiency of his invention became apparent to officials of western roads, and today his principle is employed in the machines for clearing

the tracks where the greatest snow blockades occur. About the time he was perfecting his snow plow he secured the patent on a device for holding a spirit level in surveying, besides a number of other patents of value. He ordered made the first glass fruit jars ever used. They were closed with corks and sealed with wax and held four and six quarts. He also devised a magnetic battery and took magnetic treatments in his own home. Whenever he realized a need it seemed he could meet it by reason of his superior inventive skill and ingenuity.

On the 7th of October, 1821, Mr. Root was united in marriage to Miss Lavinia Butler who was born at Durham, New York, April 9, 1803, and died at Camden that state on the 25th of June, 1834. Five children were born to them but only two, Dency Elizabeth and Clarissa Noble, reached years of maturity. During his later years Mr. Root lived a more retired life, dividing his time between his two daughters. To him was accorded the precious prize of keen mentality to the last, and his physical powers were also but slightly impaired in the closing years of his life. In 1870 he walked two miles on a bitter cold day, notwithstanding the protest of his daughters, to obtain castings for a steel sphere to be magnetized—a work which had not then been accomplished. He contracted a severe cold which brought on pneumonia and he passed away three days later.

Mr. Root was always a man of retired disposition and of few words. He spent his leisure in research along many scientific lines and remained a student to the last. Few college-bred men possessed as comprehensive a knowledge of scientific laws and principles, and in addition, Mr. Root was a man of more than ordinary literary attainments. During his travels, which covered many sections of the country, he gathered many choice curios and rare geological specimens. Although more than four decades have passed since he was called from this life it is well known that his contributions to the world's work were valuable, and some of these have not yet reached their full fruition. As the pioneer inventor of the rotary snow plow, who can measure how great is the influence and result of his work or who can estimate how much suffering as well as delay in time has been prevented by the use of this device which he brought forth? His investigation and researches along scientific lines were ever a stimulus to others. Death gives the perspective which places man in his true relations with his fellows and his age, and in this instance indicates clearly how far reaching in its efforts was the life of one of Galesburg's most honored pioneers.

[The History of Knox County, Illinois, published in 1912 by S.J. Clarke Company p. 1120-24]

ROOT MSS. The Root mss., 1815-1888, are papers of Riley Root, 1795- 1870, teacher, surveyor, inventor, and author of *Journal of Travels from St. Josephs to Oregon with Observations of that Country, together with Some Description of California, its Agricultural Interests, and a Full Description of its Gold Mines*. Galesburg, [Ill.], *Gazetteer and Intelligencer Prints*, 1850 (Lilly F593.1 .R7).

Biographical material on Riley Root is filed in the first box containing the collection and also in a folder in the oversize cases. See also Doris M. Reed's "Riley Root, Overland Traveler," *The Indiana Quarterly for Bookmen*, V: 17- 28, January, 1949 (Lilly Z1007 .I39).

Collection size: 42 items

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