

In 1825 the famous Methodist circuit rider Peter Cartwright described one of the inspiring man-made sights of the central Illinois river country: “Brick houses do not grow on trees in that country, but there were two nice large brick houses within a mile of my log cabin home. One of those houses was intended for a public inn, two stories high, double galleries on the north and south sides. For years it was the wonder of the Sangamo country.” The inn became a stagecoach stop and in 1842 was named Clayville for Whig presidential candidate Henry Clay.

The story of Clayville begins in December 1819, when John Broadwell and his wife Betsy arrived on the frontier land near what would become Richland Creek. They were soon joined by John’s father, Moses Broadwell, and the rest of the Broadwell family in 1820.

Moses Broadwell (1764-1827), a Revolutionary War veteran, moved to Sangamon County with his family in 1820. A New Jersey native brought with him his wife, Jane Broadwell, they were second cousins who shared the same grandfather, and their nine children. They came by way of Cincinnati, down the Ohio River to St. Louis and up the Illinois River by Steamboat to Beardstown.

They left Beardstown that same year in late June or early July and settled on the south side of Richland Creek, about one mile east of modern-day Pleasant Plains. Three years later November 10, 1823, Broadwell bought 550 acres of land where he was living. His sons John and Charles also purchased 240 acres. They continued buying land over the next 5 years until they had 2770 acres.

Moses Broadwell passed away only four years later in 1827 and was first buried on their family property. He was later reinterred in Oakridge Cemetery in 1862 and is where he remains today

“Clayville” was established in the mid 1820’s by Moses and his son John. Two adjoining properties were developed along the old Beardstown Road or Post Road as farm homes and an industrial site featuring a variety of enterprises: an inn with stables, a tannery, blacksmith shop, a horse mill, a schoolhouse and a store.

The tannery employed twelve and provided leather for local harness makers, farmers and cobblers. Hides of wild animals as well as those of domesticated breeds were tanned. The entire process took about a year.

The store was stocked with flour, nails, sugar, indigo(dye), whiskey, gin, molasses, and lead. Leather and a few other staples such as salt. Salt was a rare commodity and came from the salt mines of Saline County in Southern Illinois.

The large brick inn that Broadwell built is the oldest brick building in Sangamon County. It’s of the federal design, a reflection of eighteenth-century houses in Virginia and New England. Bricks for the inn were all made onsite. Other materials were cut from timber on the land. Black walnut lumber for the doors, fireplace mantles, pegs and beams. A beehive oven and large fireplace was built into the north wall of the kitchen

which included a hand-dug well just outside which provided clear and cool water. It still flows today.

Tucked away in a grove of trees, the inn was “near the center of what was then Sangamo Country, which was comprised most of what is now Sangamon, Morgan, Cass, Menard, Christian, Logan, Mason and Macon counties.” To the north rose the grassy bluffs of New Salem, while to the south and west stretch the undeveloped prairie with fields of hay, sweet with clover, brilliant coneflower and butterfly weeds. Twelve miles to the east was the frontier town of Springfield.

From the upstairs porches of the inn, Broadwell’s and their guests had a panoramic view of the Illinois Prairie. In the summer the tall grasses and brilliant flowering weeds, rippling in the wind like waves, stood as high as the head of a man on horse-back. For the traveler the inn offered warmth and security with its foot thick brick walls.

The inn served as a stagecoach stop until 1847, with visitors including Abraham Lincoln. (Clayville was a headquarters for activities of the Whig Party during the period, and the Broadwell’s called the area Clayville after Whig Statesman Henry Clay.