Portsmouth Firsts

Thomas Waller, born September 14, 1774 in Stafford County, Virginia was the first physician in Scioto County. He received his education from William and Mary College in Williamsburg, Virginia. In 1801, while traveling to West Virginia along the Ohio, he and his family stopped at Alexandria. Impressed with the needs of the area, he bought land in Alexandria and set up his practice. The seasonal flooding forced him to move to the 'new' town of Portsmouth. He was also the first town surveyor. He died in 1823 at the age of 49.

The first hotel was opened by Uriah Barber. He built a 2-story hewn log house on the corner of Front and Scioto in 1803. The first set of twins born in Portsmouth was to Barber and his wife in this house.

Portsmouth's first jail was built in 1805 on the west side of Market Street between Front and Second streets. It was 18 feet square with a hewn log floor and foundation. The log ceiling was 8 foot high. Those confined and found guilty of their crime received whippings.

The first saddle and harness shop was located on the northwest corner of Front and Massie Streets in 1807.

The first ferry crossed the Scioto River near Alexandria in 1809 by Stephen Smith. In 1813, the rates were 6 ¼ cents for a single person, 12 ½ cents for a man and horse, and 75 cents for a loaded wagon and team.

In 1814, the first general store, owned by General William Kendall, sold special glassware. The history books do not give the exact location. (The original plat map shows it may have been on Front St. between Market and Jefferson).

The first recorded tax was in 1814, and the total tax collected was $176.55.

The first council meeting was March 15, 1815. The nine councilmen were; Thomas Waller, Nathan Glover, John Brown, David Gharky, William Kendall, Josiah Shackford, Samuel Burt, William Huston and Nathan Clough. Dr. Waller was elected president.

Portsmouth's first courthouse was built in 1817, and was located on Market Street between Front and Second streets, facing the river. The building was 2-stories, 40 feet square with a tin roof. This building was used for 20 years.

The first bank was the Commercial Bank of Scioto chartered December 16, 1817. It opened on the 2nd floor of a building located at 435 Front Street. Dr. Waller was president and Jacob Offnere was a commissioner.

The first flour mill was built in 1818. Josiah Shackford and Daniel Corwin were early four mill owners of that year. An early mill, Ledbetter's Mill, stood on Front Street near the corner of Chillicothe. When the Civil War began, the making of flour was discontinued and gun barrels were then made here (the government took over the mill).

The first manufacturing company was a cotton spinning factory owned by David Gharky.

The first newspaper was published in 1818 and was known as the Portsmouth Gazette. However, it was discontinued in March of 1819. Although it was due to lack of patronage, the owners believed it was the troubled currency and lack of mail routes in the county.

General Kendall was the first to leave Alexandria. He built the first school house, the first grist mill, the first warehouse and the first steamboat. He was the first postmaster and owned the first dry-goods. He was also one of the first councilmen and was a justice of the peace.

The first public school was built in 1839 at the cost of $6,600 and was located at 4th and court (Scudder location). It was known as Fourth Street School.

The first bridge across the Scioto River was built about 1832 and was used as a toll bridge by a private company. Within a few months, a flood covered the floor and the bridge fell into the river.

The first fire department was formed in 1833 and consisted of volunteers. It had only a one-hose engine that was hand drawn to fires. It was organized because of the great fire that destroyed all property at Front and Market and extended to several buildings in a block radius.

The first 'colored school' was located in a one-story building second from the corner of 5th and Court Streets. Established in 1833, it was used for 13 years.

In 1839, an ordinance of the city council was passed for the amount of a $20,000 loan to be Portsmouth's share of the building of the first turnpike to Columbus. This was paid to the turnpike company.

The Scioto Valley and Hocking Railroad was the first railroad in this county. Work began in February of 1851, and the first locomotive came to Portsmouth on September 10, 1852. By October, 1853, it was connected with the main line of the B & O railroad and trains ran from Jackson to Portsmouth.

The city had an official lamp- lighter who went by the name Uncle Billy (McGee). The first public building to be lighted with gas was All Saints Episcopal Church. On October 7, 1855, services were held at night instead of afternoon. The sermon was, "God Said, Let There Be Light, and There Was Light."

The River City Baseball Club was the first team organized in Portsmouth. Established in 1866, the club played its games at Waller Woods, which was an area just north of Second Street, and east of Waller.

Shoe manufacturing began in Portsmouth in March of 1866, when R. Bell & Company opened a small factory above their store on Front Street, between Market and Court. The factory was able to produce 200 pairs a day on machines operated by foot-power.

In 1870, City Hospital was opened in an old two-story building located on 3 ½ acres on the west side of Chillicothe Pike (Scioto Trail). Four years later it was given to a group as a children's home. It would be 20 years before another hospital would serve the community.

The first known bowling alley in this area was a private alley maintained by Dr. A.B. Jones at his residence on 5th Street in the mid 1800s. The public bowling alleys came along in the late 1870s.

The first photographer was John W. Groomes located on 2nd Street in the 1870s.
Prior to that, he was the manager of the Western Union Telegraph.

In March of 1873, the Portsmouth Street Railroad Company began construction on the first street railway. Tracks were laid from Front and Market, north to Second, east to Chillicothe, north to Ninth, east to Offnere and north on Offnere to Greenlawn

Cemetery. The first streetcars were pulled along the tracks by horses. In July of 1891, the horse-drawn streetcar made its last run, and it wasn't until 2 years later that the electric streetcar began.

Authorized by the state of Ohio, Portsmouth's first library was located at the corner of 5th and Court Streets. Colonel James Wharton went door-to-door collecting donated books in a wheel barrel. The library opened August 12, 1879, and is still often referred to as the Wharton Library.

In 1879, the first telephones were introduced to Portsmouth residents. Each device had its own wet cell battery and a generator to signal an operator. At first, the telephone wires were strung across buildings as poles were too expensive. There were only 50 persons with telephones. The monthly charge was $4 for businesses and $2 for residential.
In the 1901 city directory, the Knox-Dickey Telephone Manufacturing Company is listed.

The first automobile in Portsmouth (and county) was a Lane Steam 2-cylinder vehicle owned by Stanley Pritchard, bicycle dealer, in 1902.