

## We might have been Hicksville

Have you ever read a sign as you passed an exit to a town and thought, “What a dumb name for a town! Glad I don’t live there!”

How would you like to be a citizen of Hicksville? William Hicks could have renamed Alexandria after himself when he bought the deserted town site in 1867. All of the town records were lost when the original settlers fled because they feared an Indian attack. Most property owners in Alexandria and some surrounding farms will find William Hicks listed as the first landowner on their abstracts.

William Hicks left his position as financial editor of the *New York Evening Post* in 1862 because of failing health. In 1863, he traveled with his family throughout Europe. (The journal that his wife Theresa kept during the trip is in the Douglas County Historical Society archives.)

Upon his return to New York, William Hicks went into business on Wall Street. In the spring of 1866, he decided to go west on a general prospecting and pleasure trip. That fall he ventured from St. Paul into the wilds of Minnesota for a hunting and fishing trip. Invigorated by Minnesota’s clean air and brisk climate, and charmed by the beauty of the Alexandria lakes area, William Hicks decided to make Alexandria his permanent home.

Just how the ownership of the Alexandria town site passed from the Kinkead’s to several other men during the four years between 1862 and 1866 is not recorded; however, William Hicks was able to purchase the town site with Indian script in 1867. He contracted for a log house to be built on the west bank of Lake Agnes where the trail road turned to what is now the Kinkead cemetery. Then he sent for his family.

That same year he built a log store building and stocked it with general merchandise, but he had much bigger plans for the town’s future in mind. The war between the North and the South was over, and men began to return to the area, among them, Thomas Cowing. He and Hicks built a sawmill on Long Lake, now Latoka. With lumber from the sawmill, he built the Woodhall Hotel on the corner of 6<sup>th</sup> and Hawthorne. Until then, all the buildings of the town site were constructed of logs.

Douglas County records for the years 1858-1862 had been destroyed during the Indian Uprising, and the county had no money to build a building to store new records. Hicks came to the rescue and built a frame building on Main Street that would serve as a temporary courthouse. The first floor was for county officials, and the second floor was the courtroom.

In 1868, he started the first newspaper, *The Alexandria Post*. The newspaper office was also in the building that served as a courthouse. The current site of our county courthouse was donated by Hicks as well. Mr. Hicks was elected to the State Legislature in 1868.

Next, Hicks contracted the building of a grist and flourmill in the middle of 10th street. It became the area’s leading industry. Completed in 1869, frontiersmen came from as far west as the Red River Settlement to have flour ground at the Hicks-Campbell Mill.

Only eight years after he arrived in Minnesota, William Hicks died of tuberculosis leaving his wife, Theresa, to raise their five children and manage the Hicks property. Following her husband’s plans for the town, Theresa donated land for a school, for three churches and for the Kinkead Cemetery, where the family burial plot is located.

As stated in his eulogy, “No man had done more for the county of his adoption than this man of energy, initiative and free enterprise.”

*(Information from the files of the Douglas County Historical Society)*