

The Man Who Saved Cleveland

By Michael Roberts and Margaret Gulley

Cleveland in the summer of 1797 was hot, thick with malaria and filled with perilous swamps. Creeks, rivers, ponds and the lake invited drowning. Poisonous snakes slithered across the narrow Indian trails and lurking in dense forests were the natives themselves, strange and fearful creatures to the aspiring pioneers.

The winter here offered even more treachery. Snow as high as a horse's head and packs of snarling wolves threatened travelers. The ice and wind could freeze a careless man to death before he could contemplate his demise.

That fall, as the surveyors of the Connecticut Land Company prepared to return east before the harsh weather set in, only four families remained to endure winter's wrath. The work had not gone well and the investors were upset because the land company was far behind schedule. While the city would be named after the surveying leader, Moses Cleaveland, he would never return, likely because of the trouble with the land company and the hardship of that summer.

Remaining behind would be the guardian of those families and ultimately the settlement itself, Lorenzo Carter. Considered a legend even in his day, Carter was a frontiersman who, when thrust into danger and travail, always seemed to emerge and prevail.

Yet today, he is barely celebrated. Time has cast a shadow on his rugged and outspoken spirit, while illuminating the more urban Moses Cleaveland. The truth is that for those first few critical years, Carter was the only thing holding the settlement together.

To this day some maintain that the city should bear Carter's name rather than that of Cleaveland.

The founding of the city was no easy adventure and what happened in the summer of 1797 illustrated the challenges that were confronted and the role played by Lorenzo Carter in the fledgling community.

Aside from the difficulties that the swamps and forests posed, the land company workers fell victim to a fever that caused dysentery and fits, rendering them exhausted and unfit for work. The illness brought death as well as more and more of the settlers and workers succumbed to the disease.

There began an exodus back to the east and the settlement appeared in jeopardy as most of the original settlers moved away from the lake and river to higher ground toward the south. At one point the Carter family was the only white inhabitants of Cleveland proper.

A tough, dark-complexioned man direct in his speech with riveting blue eyes and black shoulder length hair, Carter possessed extraordinary skills in hunting and woodcraft. He could communicate with the Native Americans and his appearance and demeanor appealed to them.

At six feet, muscular, yet as nimble as a forest creature, Carter presented an intimidating figure. His ability with ax, rifle, knife and fists were widely known. His contemporaries referred to him as the Major, or the Pioneer. Indians thought him possessed of magic and able to kill an animal with his rifle without piercing the skin.

With no medicines available to aid the suffering surveyors, Carter turned to the Indians for help. They showed him that a blend of dogwood and cherry bark would achieve similar results as quinine in easing the fever of malaria.

Carter became ill, but never succumbed to the disease. He and his wife, Rebecca, treated many in the plague filled community. He hunted game for those who lay sick with fever, enabling many to survive.

This demonstration of courage and knowledge most likely kept a flickering flame of community alive, for it would have taken years for Cleveland to develop as a location of any prominence had the fever been more ravaging.

How Carter came to the shores of Lake Erie was a story that many in the newly constituted United States shared. The lure that drew them was a future that would be governed by the freedom which had become the foundation of the new nation.

Carter grew up in Connecticut, the son of a Revolutionary War veteran who died of smallpox when Lorenzo was 11. As a child he was fascinated by the library in Warren, Connecticut, an interest that would be rekindled years later in Cleveland. After his mother remarried, the family moved to Vermont where he learned to ride and hunt and shoot and track wild animals.

In 1789, Carter married Rebecca Fuller and appeared destined to become a Vermont farmer. But *Ohio fever*--- enticing stories of the opportunity that lay to the west in the land of “New Connecticut”--- seized his imagination. Sometime in either late 1795 or early 1796 he set out with a companion to see this beckoning territory.

Carter’s reconnoitering of the Cuyahoga River gave him a vision of potential prosperity, for he returned to Vermont determined to relocate his family in the Western Reserve. They left Vermont with his brother-in-law, Ezekiel Hawley (sometimes called Holley) and his family, and wintered in Canada, arriving here on May 2, 1797.

He was 30 when he returned to the Cuyahoga River, well seasoned in the ways of the wild. Carter was more than a woodsman, though, having an aptitude for enterprise, construction, farming and the technology of the day.

Over time, it would take all of Carter's considerable skills to save the settlement from starvation, fear of Indians, and disease. Later, as the colony grew, the community turned to him as a leader to such an extent that, before laws were codified and courts established, he was the law.

He built a log cabin that summer of 1797, on the river just north of what is now St. Clair Avenue. The land for it cost \$47.50. The cabin was described as being pretentious and topped with a garret. This expansive log structure served the community in multiple ways. It was a town hall, the school house, a tavern and a place for travelers to seek shelter. It was a place to learn news, albeit old news, for the passage back to the east coast could be as long as three months.

The cabin was a malodorous place, smelling of smoke, sweat, the aroma of food cooking in the hearth and sometimes blended with the odor of New England rum. Virtually anyone who passed by was welcome and the nearby Indians would peer in with curiosity.

Rebecca Carter did not like Indians loitering around the cabin. She was terrified of them and often would cry out in fear if they surprised her. She ran and hid behind a wood pile if she saw them approach.

More than once, Lorenzo would catch a mischievous Indian harassing his wife and threaten him with physical harm, which he could deliver swifter than any man in the settlement.

The cabin hosted the first wedding in the colony on July 4, 1797 when Mrs. Carter's household worker was married. In 1801, the cabin held the first formal dance that would take place in the colony in celebration of July 4. There were more than 30 in attendance and a mixture of maple sugar, water and whisky was served to the revelers who danced to the squeal of a fiddle.

Contemporary accounts of Carter describe him as a man of principle, but not without prejudice. He made no secret of his dislike of black people, although he could not abide slavery. One account of the time illustrates the complexity of the man.

A black man named Ben had survived a shipwreck nearby on Lake Erie and in 1806. The man, nearly frozen to death, was taken to Carter's tavern where he was fed and treated for frost bitten toes. Carter and his wife nursed the man back to health.

That fall, two armed men from Kentucky arrived, claiming that the man was an escaped slave. Carter told the two that he would only consent to the black man's departure if the slave made the decision to return on his own volition.

What took place at this point is not clear, but accounts say the slave departed with the two Kentuckians only to be stopped a gun point a few miles away by two of Carter's men who held the two at bay while the black man made his escape. He later found freedom in Canada.

Carter's achievements in the early years of the community were remarkable. Seeking to create regular commerce toward the east, he built a 30-ton vessel called the Zephyr that travelled the lake coast trading furs and transporting grindstones. Historians credit him with officially opening the port of Cleveland and beginning a ship building trade that in 50 years would be the largest in the nation.

The vessel enabled the struggling frontier town to receive much needed staples like salt, iron, tools, leather, groceries and clothing. Again, Carter's intrepid ingenuity served the community as a whole.

A craftsman seemingly of infinite ability, he built the first two-story frame house on Superior only to see it burn down when children began to play with fire amidst the wood chips. Carter would also suffer the tragedy of having his son, Henry,¹⁰ drown in the Cuyahoga River. In all, he sired nine children.

In 1802, after obtaining a license for four dollars to run a tavern, Carter built yet another structure. He had purchased 23-½ acres of land, 12 of which fronted on what is now West 9th Street. Here he built a block house that would gain fame as the Carter Tavern and it served as the first hotel in Cleveland.

Carter complained of the land company prices which seemed continually to decline, dropping from \$50 an acre to \$25 at one point.

Carter was elected as a captain in the militia in May of 1804, but the election was contested by those who claimed that he was ineligible for the office because he gave liquor to the voters and threatened to turn the savages on the community if not elected. Apparently, nothing became of the charges, but the challenge served to show the disaffection between the pioneers and the newcomers. In August, Carter was elected major, a title he carried for the rest of his life.

The clashes between Carter and the increasing number of easterners who had invested in the Connecticut Land Company were frequent. The newcomers resented Carter's influence, position and prestige.

Carter had such a reputation as a fighter that strangers hearing of his prowess, would travel here, perhaps to best him in a brawl. Those who knew him said that he was never known to lose a street fight.

The first indictment recorded in the Western Reserve was in 1803 and was noted as being against "Mr. Carter, the pioneer, for an assault upon James Hamilton." Friends attested that Carter was not a quarrelsome person and would only fight if he was insulted. One can only guess what the dispute was regarding Hamilton.

He also had a reputation in contemporary histories of being a man who helped the unfortunate and obliged neighbors and strangers. A drink could always be had at his tavern.

Liquor was a commodity that played an important role on the frontier. It was not only to drink, it could be bartered as currency. Sadly, one of its more important uses was to quell the natives who had a taste for spirits, but could not manage its excesses. Carter was a practiced producer of alcohol and equally adept at manipulating the Indians with it.

In 1798, when a Seneca medicine man was accused of malpractice in the death of the wife of an Indian from another tribe, the husband stabbed him to death, causing the potential for tribal warfare.

Already the Chippewas had donned black war paint and were off in the forest issuing blood curdling oaths and behaving in the most fearsome manner.

Carter recognizing that any fighting could get out of control and the violence spill over into the white community, ameliorated the dispute by having a neighbor brew two gallons of whiskey. Since the capacity of the still was only two quarts daily, it took some time to yield the liquor. The danger was so dire that Carter did not sleep for two nights, according to his son Alonzo.

The Chippewas and Ottawas traditionally celebrated in the spring and one year they traded furs with Carter for whisky. When they drank the first lot, they traded for more, and so on until the band of natives became drunk. A calculating Carter decided to cut the whisky with water while continuing to barter with the braves.

Upon coming to their senses, the Indians realized that the spirits had been diluted and became enraged. Nine of them attacked the Major's cabin. He fought them off with a fire poker, driving them to the river and their canoes. Later, a party of Indian women came to make peace with Carter. Thankfully, the women had disarmed the braves before the drinking bout had begun.

By 1810, following the purchase of land on the west bank of the Cuyahoga River from the Indians, Carter and his son bought a piece of land near the river's mouth. There they built the Red House Tavern and established a farm.

Carter had his vision of justice and administered it in the colony in a manner that brought him acclaim by his fellow citizens. In 1812, When an Indian brave, an acquaintance of Carter's, was found guilty of murder, it was Lorenzo who escorted him to the gallows on what is now Public Square. He gave the condemned man whisky to numb his fear and saw to it that he was properly dispatched. Such was justice on the frontier.

That year, Carter discovered he was suffering from a form of cancer on his face. The indomitable Major travelled to Virginia where physicians told him his disease was untreatable. He returned and unable to accept his fate, secluded himself in his room at the tavern, crying out in pain and refusing the ministrations of his wife who remained outside his door throughout the ordeal. It was a humbling end for a man so robust and heroic.

After his death Carter's half brother, John A. Ackley, would write:

“Many stories are told of Major Carter, some are true, and many that are not true. He was the man for a pioneer, with strength of body and mind, but not cultivated. His maxim was not to give an insult, nor receive one, without resenting it, and the insulter generally paid dear for his temerity. With all his faults, his heart was in the right place and was as ready to avenge a wrong done to the weak as one done to himself.”

Carter died on February 14, 1814 at the age of 47, and is buried in Erieview Cemetery just left of the gate on East 9th Street. Everyday, hundreds of cars pass a few yards from his grave, oblivious of this remarkable man and what he did in that dark and dangerous beginning. But for him, there may never have been a great city on the spot it is.