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What Kept People Busy in 1850?

A Survey of Occupations Recorded by the 1850 U.S. Census of Harrison County

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What happened in 1850? What were people doing? It is a year best known in American history for the creation of two important documents, the Compromise of 1850 and the decennial census of the United States.

The Compromise of 1850 was one in a long string of compromises which only ended up only postponing that which seemed inevitable to many, a civil war which would divide families, communities, and states and which eventually cost the country hundreds of thousands of lives.

The 1850 census was the tool which cemented that divide in that it was used to apportion representation in the starkly divided Congresses of the following decade. Yet, ironically, that same census has been instrumental in reuniting the descendants of many families divided by that war and a century-and-a-half in that it has helped many a family historian reconstruct the relationships of that era.

On Saturday, June 1, 1850, we know just about where everybody was (or where they were supposed to be), for on that “census day” the name and location of each individual free resident of the United States was recorded. We also know the gender, race, age, and birthplace of each person, who their neighbors were and who owned slaves, and many other details.

However, in the effort to fill in the blanks of a genealogy, one part of the record is largely overlooked, the documentation of what kept people busy from day to day. What did they do? How did they make a living? Where or to whom did one go to get a horse shod or a cabinet made?

To learn more, read about this interesting topic in the pages which follow. (*Cont'd on page 4*)

Events of 1850

January 29—U.S. Senator Henry Clay of Kentucky introduced five bills in Congress allowing for the admission of new states after the war with Mexico, allowing for slavery in some territories in an effort to prevent civil war. The bills came to be known as the Compromise of 1850

March 7—Senator Daniel Webster of Massachusetts gave his “Seventh of March” speech and which he endorsed the Compromise.

March 16—*The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne was published.

March 18—American Express was founded by Henry Wells and William Fargo.

June 1—Census Day. For the seventh time in U.S. history census takers fanned out across the country to make a count of each individual, white or black, free or slave.

July 9—President Zachary Taylor died. Vice-President Millard Fillmore succeeded the War of 181 veteran and Mexican War hero to become the 13th President of the United States.

September 9—The Compromise of 1850 was passed and allowed California to be admitted as a free state, abolished the slave trade in Washington, D.C., stripped Texas of a third of its claimed territory (now parts of Colorado, Kansas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Wyoming) in return for the U.S. federal government assuming \$10 million of Texas's pre-annexation debt, and the U.S. Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act on September 18.