“Colonel Johnston’s”

There’s a lot to see at the Johnston Farm and Indian Agency, located in Piqua, Ohio, right off I-75, north of Dayton. One of Ohio’s historical gems, the farm features a spring house, a cider house, an 1815 federal brick farmhouse, an Adena Indian earthwork and mound, a canal boat and the chance to ride on it, and, of course, the barn, a rare log double-pen barn, one of few left in Ohio and probably one of Ohio’s first ones, built in 1808. Throughout the year, the farm plans activities for the entire family, ranging from re-enactors portraying early Ohio history to a relaxing ride on the General Harrison on the Miami and Erie Canal.

With the exception of the Indian mound, the other structures trace back to John Johnston, born in in Ballyshannon in the north of Ireland in 1775, a year before America’s declaration of independence. In 1786, three years after the Treaty of Paris, John, only 11, left his family in Ireland and emigrated to the new country, accompanied by a priest and a trusted family friend, also his tutor. He settled in Pennsylvania. Five years later his family joined him.

This was 1791, a time when Ohio and Indiana were considered the Northwest Territory, filled with many tribes of Native Americans, some friendly, some hostile. During Johnston’s travels, he found his dream land in Upper Piqua, near the Great Miami River, and promised himself that someday he’d be a farmer there.

But this was untamed land of the new country and full of danger. To provide safety for the influx of white settlers, many of them veterans of the American Revolution who were awarded land grants in Ohio and Indiana, in 1790 President Washington sent General Josiah Hamar with 1,500 troops, many untrained militia, to build forts and seek peace with the tribes in western Ohio and eastern Indiana. Chief Little Turtle and his Miamis soundly defeated Hamar and his army. The next year he sent General Arthur St. Clair, the governor of the Northwest Territory, to solve the problem. But again the Indians prevailed. Of the 1400 troops, mostly untrained militia, less than 800 survived.

This was 1792 – and the Northwest Territory became the real-life education of John Johnston. Now 17 and working as a wagoner, he brought supplies to General Wayne’s forward supply post, Fort Piqua, located on the present-day Johnston Farm site. Determined both to win and have peace with the Indians, Washington had appointed General Anthony Wayne as commander of the United States Army of the Northwest. General Wayne seemed to have more foresight than his two predecessors and ordered forts to be constructed along the western Ohio border – Fort Recovery, Fort Greenville, and Fort Defiance. Large hand-hewn logs were used to construct these forts, making the walls impenetrable to hostile fire.

President Washington and the young Congress also realized that an army of militiamen was not sufficient and they authorized the creation of a regular army, the foundation of our armed forces, and put General Wayne in charge. This army, assembled and trained in Fort Pitt, numbered over 5,000. Together, General Wayne and his men marched north, along his line of forts, and defeated the Indians at the Battle of Fallen Timbers in 1794. Johnston kept them supplied. A year later General Wayne signed the Treaty of Greenville with Indian leaders, relinquishing the majority of Ohio land to the United States. The great Tecumseh refused to attend. He still hoped to unite the many diverse tribes into one central force to stop the tide of the pioneers.

By now Johnston had returned to Philadelphia and took a clerkship in the War Department. He rented a room at that time with a family by the name of Robinson. In 1802 romance struck when, at 27, he fell in love with a 16 year-old Rachel Robinsonin, eloped with her, and traveled west, where he ran the trading post at Fort Wayne, Indiana. She bore four of their 15 children in their time at the fort. Later Johnston became both the Factor and Indian agent at Fort Wayne, though his heart still yearned for the land near Piqua. Two years later, he bought the property – in 1804, the same year that President Jefferson commissioned the expedition of Lewis and Clark to explore the new land that the United States purchased from France in 1803. Our country was expanding.

In 1808 Johnston, still working in Fort Wayne, began to construct buildings on his farm, including the barn. Cleverly, rather than cutting down huge trees to use for beams in the double-pen barn, Johnston used timbers from one of General Wayne’s forts, which apparently was not being used. To look at these massive beams and realize where they came from is inspiring.

In 1811, the same year as the Battle of Tippecanoe, won by William Henry Harrison, governor of the Indiana Territory, Johnston left Fort Wayne to become a farmer on his property in Piqua. Ohio, now having been a state of the union for eight years, was still full of Indians, but it’s where Johnston decided to sink his roots.

When the war of 1812 broke out, the government appointed Johnston as the Indian agent in Piqua. His work with the Shawnee, Delaware, Seneca, and Wyandot tribes helped to ease tensions during this war and earned him respect and recognition as an early Ohio leader. He continued his work at the agency until 1829 when he was removed by President Andrew Jackson for political reasons. By that time many of the tribes had become relocated to western states.

Years later he helped found Kenyon College in 1825, became one of Ohio’s Canal commissioners, and played a role in the creation of a major road from Ft. Meigs to Wapakoneta. He continued to farm and raise his large family. One month before the Civil War began Johnston died – in February of 1861. Though he was gone, one of his sons served for the Union. Two older sons had served in the military during the Mexican War and had died as a result of their service. I’m sure he would have been proud of them. We’re likewise proud of this early Ohio pioneer and we’re grateful that the Johnston farm preserves not only the magnificent log barn but the other old buildings as well.