

# How John Dement foiled a Dixon stagecoach robbery

In 1840 “Father” John Dixon went to Washington, D.C., to get the U.S. Land Office moved from Galena to Dixon. Because Dixon was much more centrally located than Galena, such a move clearly was a benefit to the throngs of settlers moving to north-west Illinois.

In his visit to the nation’s capital, Dixon met with General Winfield Scott, a friend who had spent time in the Dixon cabin during the 1832 Black Hawk War. Knowing that the general was a trusted ally of President Martin Van Buren, Dixon asked for Scott’s assistance in the land office matter.

Gen. Scott then introduced Dixon to the president, who recognized the good sense of moving the land office to Dixon. After all, Galena was in the extreme northwest corner of the state, and Dixon had become a major hub of stagecoach trails to all key points throughout the region.

President Van Buren then appointed Col. John Dement to the Dixon land office as the receiver of public moneys, a position he previously held in Galena. Dement was no stranger to Dixon, having served this area with distinction during the Black Hawk War. He also gained significant stature in the state as Franklin



## COMMUNITY VOICES

Tom Wadsworth

County sheriff, a state representative and a state treasurer.

### The federal land office in Dixon

Bringing the federal land office to Dixon was a major boon to the town. The land office meant that all who bought land from the government had to come to Dixon to render payment. As Col. Dement accumulated these substantial funds, he then had to arrange their safe transport from Dixon to the federal treasury banks in St. Louis and Chicago.

The Dixon land office was on the northwest corner of Ottawa and Second streets, which today is a parking lot next to the First Baptist Church. This location was significant in 1840. It was steps away from James (son of John) Dixon’s home on the southwest corner of Ottawa and First streets. Since Dixon’s home served as the post office, Col. Dement could easily place land office funds on the stagecoach that carried the U.S. mail.

With so much money being trans-

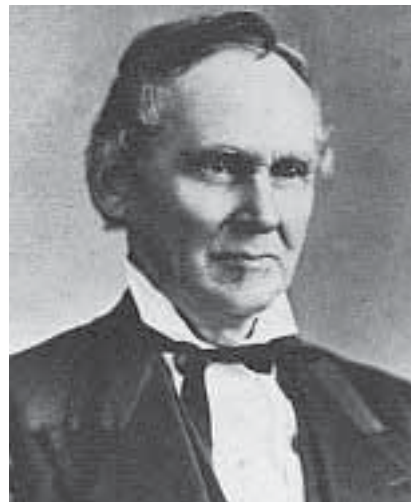


Photo provided by Tom Wadsworth

Col. John Dement served during the Black Hawk War, as Franklin County sheriff, and as a state representative and a state treasurer.

ported so frequently from the Dixon land office, would-be robbers began to see the potential of making a big score at this vulnerable location. In 1840, Dixon’s population was only 725, and the land office was not as secure as one in a larger city.

As journalist William Cullen Bryant wrote when he visited Dixon in

1841: “The thinly settled populations of Illinois were much exposed” to criminal activity. This was especially true in Lee and Ogle counties, where the notorious “banditti [bandits] of the prairie” had established a base of operations.

### The banditti of the prairie

“A plan had long been on foot to rob the Dixon Land Office,” wrote Edward Bonney in his famous 1850 book, “The Banditti of the Prairies.”

Bonney had infiltrated the banditti by posing as a counterfeiter, and he had firsthand knowledge of their devious plans. Many of the bandits were well-known locals who maintained a private criminal life unknown to the citizenry.

One of the gang, Bonney said, strolled into the Dixon land office and struck up a chat. He eventually asked Dement when he intended to take the land office funds to Chicago.

Dement, however, “being upon his guard, and a prudent man,” slyly provided the wrong delivery date to the inquirer. As Bonney wrote, the colonel “thereby baffled the preconcerted schemes of the robbers.”

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## Rock Falls third graders receive dictionaries



Photo provided by Rock Falls Rotary Club

Rock Falls Rotarian Cheryl Faber is shown in a third grade classroom at East Coloma-Nelson, where dictionaries were presented during American Education Week. Rock Falls Rotarians visited public and private schools in Rock Falls to present third grade students with age-appropriate dictionaries. Shown is Rock Falls Rotarian Cheryl Faber in a classroom of third graders at East Coloma-Nelson. The dictionaries were presented during American Education Week. A total of 140 dictionaries were distributed.

### • VOICES

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#### Raiding the stagecoach

Armed with Dement's bogus response, the bandits then orchestrated their heist of the Dixon stagecoach. They identified a vulnerable stretch on the stagecoach trail from Dixon to Chicago, about 4 miles east of Rockford.

There, lying in wait along the trail, the bandits spotted the four-horse Dixon stagecoach, clip-clopping to Chicago with a full load of passengers. One of the bandits stealthily approached the noisy, slow-moving coach from the rear, climbed up the back to the luggage rack atop the coach and proceeded to throw off the trunks and baggage.

The stagecoach driver didn't realize anything was missing until the next stop. The following morning, a search near the stagecoach trail discovered the passengers' missing luggage broken open, their contents gone.

#### Foiled again

However, the bandits found no land office money on that coach. Dement's clever misinformation had foiled their plans.

This wasn't the only time. As Frank Stevens reported in his 1914 "History of Lee County," the banditti hatched "many plots" to rob Dement's shipments from the land office, "but none succeeded."

The colonel's acquaintance with the wiles of devious behavior came from his years of experience as a sheriff and as receiver in the Galena land office – and perhaps from his years in politics.

"It ever was his habit to study

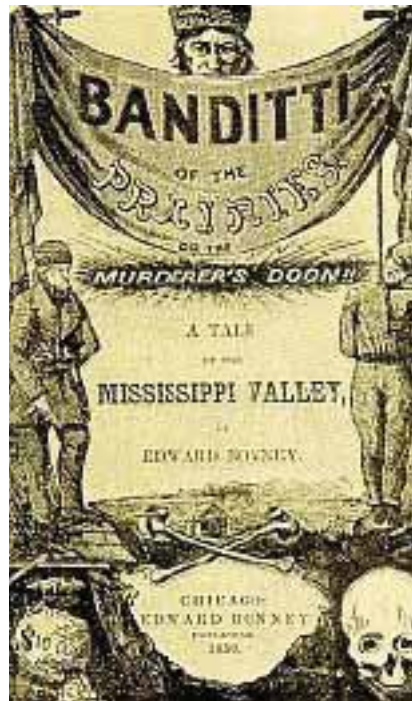


Photo provided by Tom Wadsworth

Edward Bonney's 1850 book "The Banditti of the Prairies".

means to thwart the plans of the banditti," Stevens wrote, "and they expressed marvel at the vigilance which could defeat them."

From John Dement's arrival in Dixon in 1840 until his death in 1883, the city would continue to benefit greatly from his community mindedness, business acumen, political influence and civic leadership. But the full story of the namesake of Dement Town and Dement Avenue must be saved for another time.

• A Dixon native, Tom Wadsworth is a writer, speaker and occasional historian. He holds a Ph.D. in New Testament.

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