



## A Brief History of Onslow, Jones County, Iowa

*Onslow was platted in 1871, occupying land in Madison and Wyoming Townships in Jones County, Iowa. Four generations of Wassons called Onslow home.*

When John and Jemima Wasson first arrived in Iowa in 1854, they settled in Jackson County. By 1859 or 1860, they were living in Clay Township in Jones County, and in 1864 they purchased a farm in Madison Township in Jones County.

Seven years later, family friend E.M. Franks platted the village of Onslow about a mile east of the John Wasson Farm. Onslow would become the hometown of John and Jemima and the next three generations of Wassons, where they shopped, attended school, worshipped and found community.



*Onslow, Iowa from the northeast with the site of the John Wasson Farm marked*

## **Iowa**

Today's Iowa was originally settled by Native American tribes, primarily Dakota Sioux, Illini, Ioway, Missouriia and Otoe. The Sac and Fox tribe was driven into the region from what is now Michigan after Europeans arrived in North America.

White settlement of Iowa began with what is now Dubuque in 1788, although this was not part of the United States at the time. It was part of Louisiana, which the U.S. purchased from the French in 1803. It initially became Indian Territory, but Native American tribes were steadily pushed out over the next 30 years. The first American settlers to officially move to what is now Iowa did so in 1833. The Territory of Iowa was established in 1838 when it was separated from Wisconsin Territory. Eight years later, Iowa became the nation's 29<sup>th</sup> state.

Statehood led to the resolution of state boundaries and purchasing most of the remaining lands held by Native Americans. This was followed by a push to encourage both settlers and investors, and settlement of Iowa began in earnest.

## **Jones County**

Jones County was established in 1837, encompassing land that had been part of Dubuque County. It was organized late in 1838, and the first commissioners court meeting was held in 1840.

Federal law required the government to give each new county a quarter section where the county could lay out its county seat. Edinburgh<sup>1</sup> was soon established on that land in Jones County. A town was slow to grow up around the log cabin courthouse there, however, earning it the nickname "a city of grass", so the county seat was moved to Newport, although no courthouse was ever built there. In 1847, the county seat was moved to Lexington, later renamed Anamosa. There have been a handful of failed attempts since then to move the county seat to a more central location.

The Edinburgh Pioneer Cemetery marks the site of Edinburgh. The Edinburgh Pioneer Village at the site serves as a history museum for Jones County.

Jones County grew from a population of about 3,000 in 1850 to about 20,000 in 1870. Its population has remained in the range of about 20,000 since then. It is home to a number of small towns and settlements, and remains generally rural/agricultural. Its largest cities are Anamosa and Monticello, which combined account for about half of the county's population today.

<sup>1</sup> Maps and other sources use both "Edinburg" and "Edinburgh" spellings



*Iowa Territory, 1838*

### **The Townships**

Jones County was divided into townships starting in 1842, following standard practices of the time.

Clay Township was organized in 1844. Pierce Township was separated from Clay Township in February 1854. It was renamed Wyoming Township a few years later. Madison Township was established in 1855. The John Wasson Farm was in Madison Township, and the Sim-Wasson Farm was in Wyoming Township. Onslow straddles the boundary between these two townships, and includes land in both townships.



## Onslow

Onslow was platted by E.M. Franks in 1871.



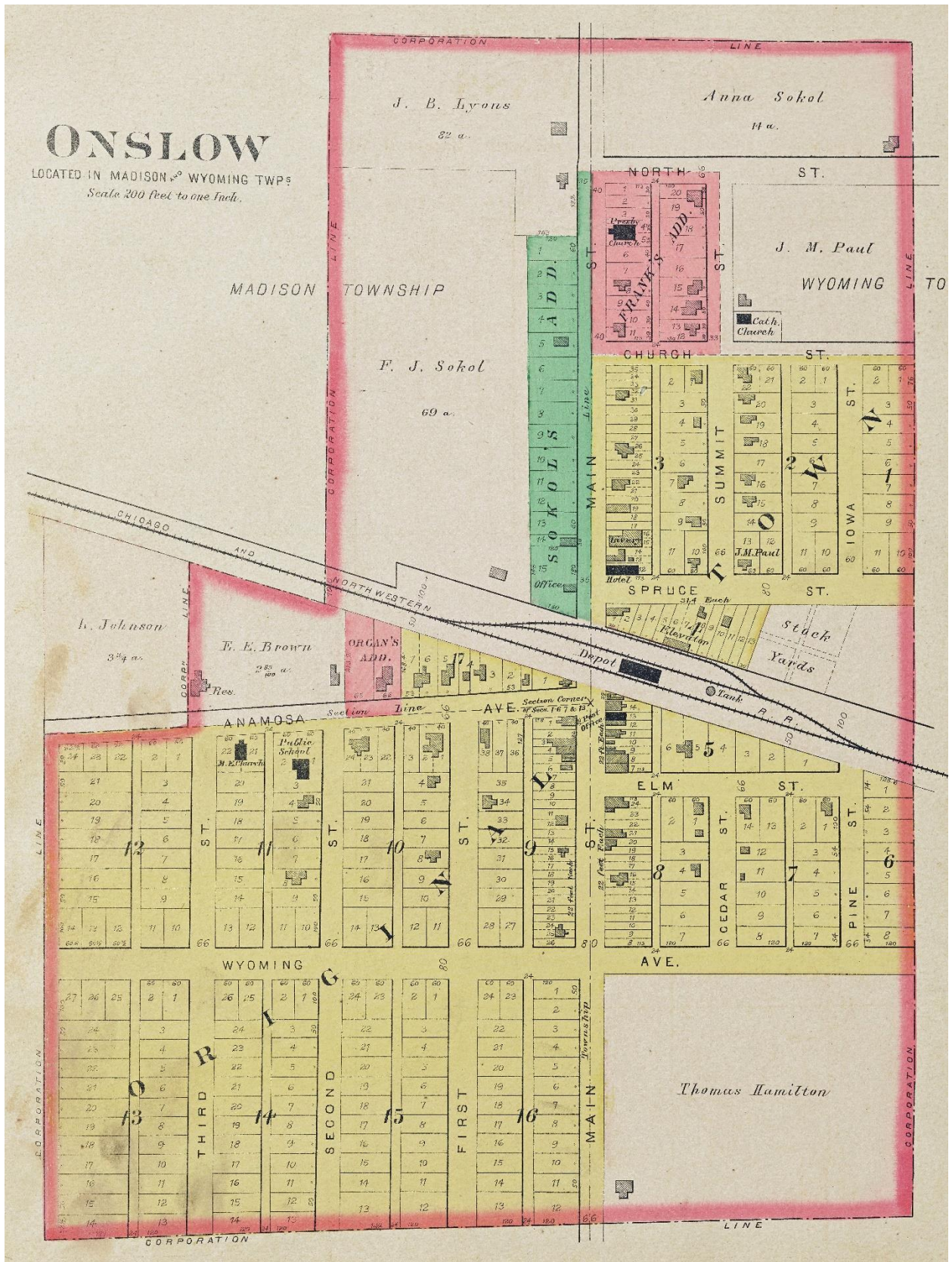
*The family of Esau M. Franks*

Esau M. Franks was a businessman in Canton, Iowa, east of present-day Onslow, mostly just across the county line in Jackson County. He owned Canton's largest mercantile, a packing plant and stockyards. He befriended the Wassons when they first arrived in Canton from New York in 1854, and helped them get established in Iowa.

Around 1866, planning for the Midland Railroad was under way. Franks and other Canton businessmen started to look for new opportunities along its proposed route. Franks bought several hundred acres of land about seven miles west of Canton in Jones County. He moved his mercantile operation to this location, and then in 1871 he went on to found Onslow. The first freight train heading east out of Onslow was in September of that year.

Onslow was originally named Franksburg. But after Franks had a shipment of goods delayed because they had been sent instead to Franksburg, Minnesota, he pushed to have the name changed to Onslow.

Onslow was incorporated in 1888, ten years after Franks died.



Onslow in 1893



*Early photo of the Onslow Railroad Depot, about 1907*



*Onslow Railroad Depot, 1950*

In November 1871, a seed group of a dozen charter members mostly from the Scotch Grove Presbyterian Church established the Onslow Presbyterian Church. John Wasson helped raise money to secure the church building, and for a time served as a church trustee. John and Jemima Wasson's children united with the Onslow Presbyterian Church in the 1870s, although son William then united with the Methodist church shortly after he married Maggie Ransom. Daughter Jeannette Wasson Sim taught Sunday School at the Onslow Presbyterian church for forty years.



*Onslow Presbyterian Church. The Wassons were active members of the church.*



*In 1921, the steeple was struck by lightning, and was replaced by a square cupola.*



*1949 Onslow Vacation Bible School; Boyd Wasson is in the back row*



*The church took on a new look when the cupola was removed and the roof was altered in 1964.*

When Onslow was established, school districts generally could not cross township lines, so Onslow was divided between school districts in two township. But the law allowed independent school districts to unite, even across township lines. In 1874, voters first approved carving Onslow-centric independent school districts out of the two township districts. They then approved uniting these newly created districts into one.

The first public school in this new Onslow Independent School District was built in 1874, a one-room school that was expanded to a two-room school in 1878. In order to accommodate the growing student population of the area, a new two-story four-room school was built in 1898. A bigger, more modern school opened in 1936 and was expanded in 1957. The Onslow school district became part of the Midland School District in 1960, and high school classes were moved to the school in nearby Wyoming that year. Due to declining enrollment, the Onslow school eventually became just an elementary school. It closed in 2007.

Joe Wasson had been a student at the Wasson School, a country school near his home at the John Wasson Farm in Madison Township, before the first Onslow Public School opened. He may have attended the new school, as he was 17 years old when it opened. Joe and Carrie Wasson's children Ella, Jessie and Duncan attended this school.

When this school was replaced in 1898, David Sim and his wife Jeannette Wasson Sim bought the property and built their retirement residence there. Part of the old school was sold and relocated to another property. The rest of the school was converted into a barn on the Sim property. Joe Wasson and Duncan Wasson were later owners of the Sim's home. Duncan tore down the barn in 1944.



*The original Onslow Public School, built in 1874 and enlarged in 1878 (left); the Sim barn in the early 1900s (right)*



*This Onslow Public School building replaced the original school in 1898.*

Jessie and Duncan finished their schooling at the 1898 school. Their sister Ella had finished her education before this school opened. Duncan and Esther Wasson's children Walter, Douglas and Glenn began their schooling here.



Onslow School, 1934

*The students attending the 1898 school in 1934, including Glenn Wasson, the ninth person kneeling in the first row, and Walter Wasson, the second person in the third row.*

The 1898 school itself was replaced in 1936. Duncan and Esther's children Walter (Class of 1939), Glenn (Class of 1943) and Boyd (Class of 1953) completed their secondary education in this building, each graduating as the valedictorian of his class.



*A new Onslow Public School opened in 1936.*



*The Onslow Public School 3<sup>rd</sup> grade class poses for a picture in front of the 1936 school. Boyd Wasson is in the center of the back row.*



*The Onslow Public School with its 1957 addition*



*The Midland Middle/Sr. High School campus in Wyoming in 2021. Although none of the Wassons attended the Midland School, Wasson descendant Eric Wasson taught at Midland during the 2010-2011 school year.*

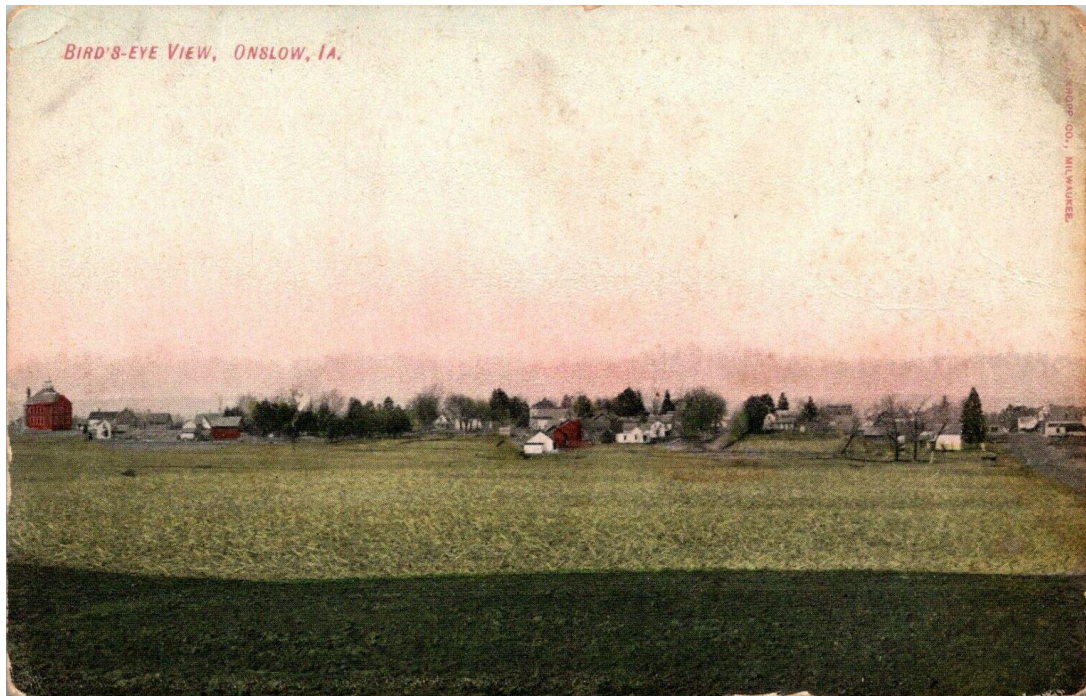
By 1879, the new town was home to three churches, a public school, a large general store, a hardware store, two drug stores, a grocery store, a furniture store, a farm implement store, a lumber yard, a grain elevator, a confectionary store, a millinery store, an art gallery, two blacksmith shops, two wagon and repair shops, a cheese factory, a livery stable, a hotel, a meat market, a harness shop, two doctors, a dentist, a lawyer and a saloon. Onslow was also a significant railroad stop, especially for shipping livestock, so stockyards were built to support that.

Electricity came to town in 1914, and water mains were dug the following year.

The town later supported a couple newspapers, auto garages, veterinarians, restaurants, a gas station and a bank, among other businesses. However, like a lot of towns of this size, today there are few businesses left. Buildings were torn down, only some of which were replaced. A 2019 fire wiped out a significant portion of what was left of the buildings on the east side of Main Street, although new construction replaced some of what was lost by 2021.

Onslow has never been a big city. Its population has generally hovered in the low to mid-200s in U.S. Census counts from 1880 to 2000, finally dipping below 200 in the 2010 U.S. Census. Its boundaries include about 0.23 square mile.

## Photos of Onslow



*Looking north toward the west side of Onslow, Iowa, 1910*



*Looking north towards Onslow, 2013*



*Heading north on Main Street into downtown Onslow, date unknown*



*East side of Main Street, date unknown*



*East side of Main Street, date unknown*



*East side of Main Street, 1965*



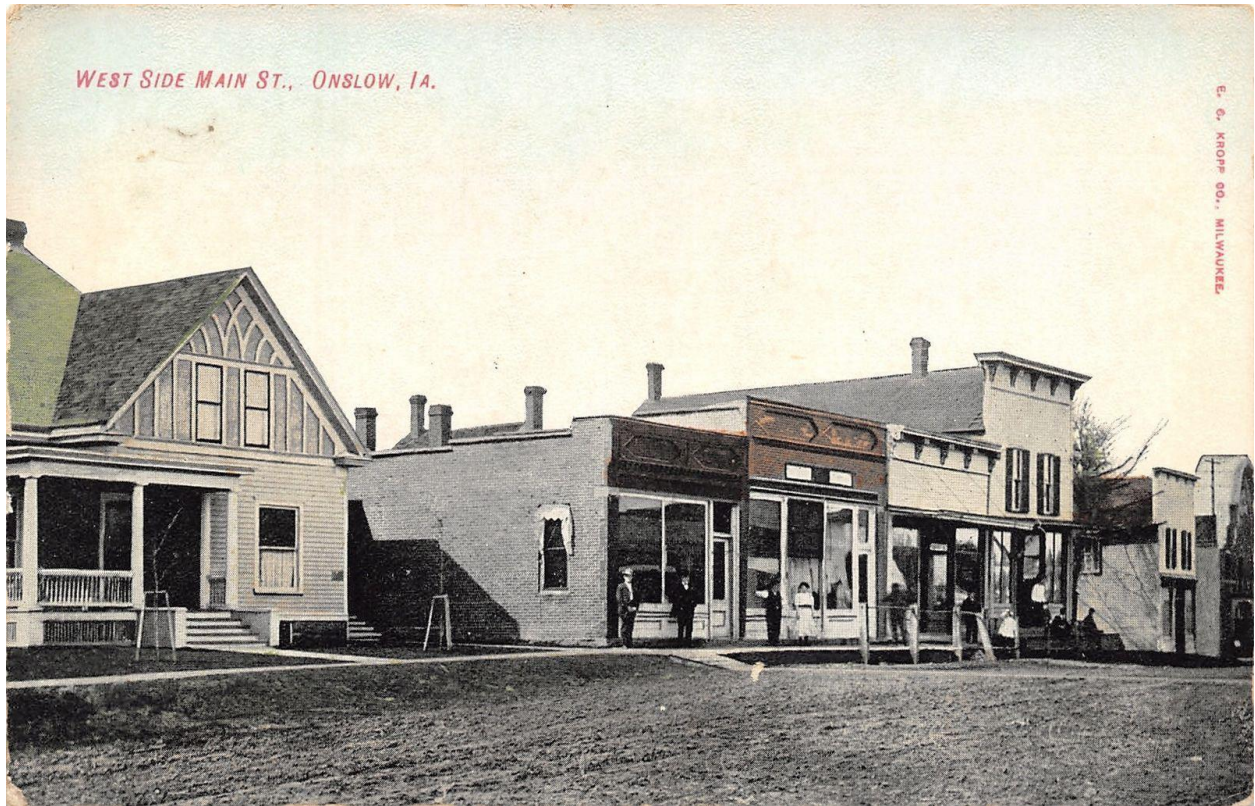
*East side of Main Street, 1993*



*East side of Main Street after the 2019 fire*



*The east side of Main Street featured new construction by 2021.*



*West side of Main Street, date unknown*



*West side of Main Street, date unknown. The second building from the left is now the Onslow Community Room.*



*The Onslow Community Room, 2007. The city purchased the Noonan property in about 1933, which was refurbished, creating the community room. It was also home to a small library for several years.*



*Boyd Wasson's high school letter sweater is on display in the Onslow Community Room. Boyd lettered four years in baseball and three years in basketball. The star above the O indicates that he was team captain his senior year.*



Looking south on Main Street with the Miller Hotel on the near right side, about 1908



The same view in 2021



*Further north, looking south on Main Street, Onslow, Iowa, date unknown*



*This was built in about 1916 for Harbison Orr, who started an auto garage here. Harb Orr married Jessie Wasson McBride in 1918 and moved to Cedar Rapids, Iowa later that year. The building later housed Chaplin Implements, but the building has since been replaced. © Google Street View*



*The Miller Hotel, 1910. Today, the Onslow post office is located at this site on the northwest corner of Main Street and Anamosa Avenue.*



*The Onslow post office, 2007*



*Looking west along Anamosa Avenue. The house seen through the trees on the left side of the road at various times has been home to David and Jeannette Sim; Duncan Wasson; Joe Wasson, his wife Edna and her children; and Duncan and Esther Wasson and their sons Glenn and Boyd.*



*Looking west along Anamosa Avenue in 2021*



*Chamberlain Park, 2007*

You can learn more about Onslow and its history in the following:

- [Onslow, Iowa Centennial 1871-1971](#) – Calvin Reiss et al. (1971)
- [The History of Jones County, Iowa](#) – Western Historical Co. (1879)
- [The History of Jones County, Iowa Past and Present](#) – R.M. Corbit (1910)

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Last updated October 31, 2021