The first settlers migrated south from Fort Garry, now called Winnipeg, in 1812. They were a part of the Lord Selkirk colonization party and made their homes at almost the exact spot where the forty-ninth parallel of latitude crosses the Red River.

In 1823, President Monroe issued orders to Major Stephen H. Long to explore this valley. Splendidly equipped and having in his party noted scientists and surveyors, Major Long secured authentic information, which later was issued in book form. The historian of the party wrote glowingly of the fertile soil, the agreeable climate and the abundance of game and fish. In fertility of the soil he likened it to the valley of the Nile and prophesized that it would produce food to feed millions when opened for white settlement.

The record shows that Major Long forded the Red Lake River at a point not far west of the ‘Old Crossing’ which early became a historic spot in this section of the United States. Proceeding northward, he encountered the settlers of the Selkirk company at Pembina. The official surveyor established the exact location of the forty-ninth parallel of latitude, which had been agreed upon as the northern boundary, and ascertained that all but six families living in this settlement had built their homes on the American side of the line and were therefore privileged to claim the protection of the Stars and Stripes, and be citizens of the United States Government. It is recorded there was great rejoicing and that a magnificent feast was held in honor of the visitors.

Count Geacomo Constantino Beltrami, who accompanied Major Long on his expedition to Pembina in 1823, left that party there and travelled southeasterly with two Chippewa guides to find the source of the Mississippi. He evidently went down Thief River to its junction with the Red Lake River, where his guides left him. He hired another guide and went up the river to Red Lakes, then down to Lake Julia, across to Lake Bemidji, down the Mississippi. The inaccuracies of his reports are apparent when he stated ‘Lake Julia was the most northern source of the Mississippi and that the Red Lakes were the most southern source of the Red River.’

Another explorer, who was first to explore what was later to become the southeastern boundary of the original Polk County, was Henry R. Schoolcraft. Schoolcraft, a mineralogist, accompanied Governor Lewis Cass to northern Minnesota in 1830 to get the Chippewa and Sioux Indians to cease their warfare. Regarding the success of this mission, Schoolcraft stated, ‘Much good tobacco and eloquence was wasted on Indian tribes.’ On May 3, 1832, Schoolcraft was issued an order authorizing him to make an expedition on the upper Mississippi. His party was well equipped with a surgeon to vaccinate Indians against smallpox and a clergyman in addition to the regular corps of helpers. He reached Cass Lake on July 10, 1832, and first saw the headwaters lake (which he named Itasca) on July 13, 1832. Some later explorers have contended that the small Elk Lake which connects to Lake Itasca may be the source of the Mississippi; however, authorities agree that Lake Itasca is the source of the great Mississippi and that the honor for its discovery belongs to Henry R. Schoolcraft.

It has been the purpose of this report to include only a report of the early explorers who left reliable records of their visitations of the area. Many other early explorers evidently visited some parts of the Red River Valley who lacked a knowledge of the geographical areas they visited. Fur traders did move up the Red River to points at or near Grand Forks more than 100 years ago. They were a migratory lot; however, one of their number did remain to be the first or one of the first white settlers in Polk County. He was William Nash, settled in '69 at East Grand Forks.