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John Ball: Pioneer, Educator . . . Lawyer?

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If you haven't been to the John Ball Zoo in Grand Rapids, you've likely heard of it. But who was John Ball? And how did he end up in Grand Rapids after having been born in New Hampshire in 1794?

Ball graduated from Dartmouth College in 1820. He then studied law for two years in Lansingburgh, New York, before moving to Darien, Georgia. Unfortunately, he was shipwrecked and taught school for the winter of 1822–23 to earn passage back to New York. He was admitted to the bar in 1824 in New York, but left the law practice to help his sister run a factory after her husband had passed away.

In 1832, Ball traveled to the Oregon Country (before Oregon was a state) as a member of Nathaniel Jarvis Wyeth's first expedition. While wintering in Fort Vancouver, he served as an educator, but dreamed of becoming a farmer. So he then moved towards Salem, Oregon, and planted a wheat crop. He soon tired of the frontier life, sold his wheat crop, and bought a ticket to head back to the United States (by way of the Hawaiian Islands and Cape Horn) in 1833-34.

In 1837, he settled in Grand Rapids, and opened a law practice. He eventually became partners with Solomon Lewis Withey. Withey would later be appointed by President Lincoln in 1863 to serve as the first Federal District Court Judge for the Western District of Michigan.

Ball was known for his representation of eastern capitalists in the wildcat banking era, as well as his support of the public education system.

Upon his death in 1884, 40 acres of land was donated that would become part of what we now know as John Ball Park / John Ball Zoo, a treasure for all of us.