

Grave Markers at Keokuk

By PEARL GORDON VESTAL

Visitor or citizen at Keokuk can read history at Victory park, on the water front, on the bluff at Rand park, in the beautiful grounds of the National cemetery and at scattered points along Main street.

Older than Keokuk, the city, in the life and memory of Keokuk, the man, for whom the municipality is named. The most conspicuous historical marker in the city is the magnificent bronze statue of the Indian chief, placed upon a high pedestal, fronting the river boulevard in Rand park, and facing, from the high river bluff, a sweeping panorama of Mississippi waters. We will park, walk around the stately figure, and read history and biography from the four sides of the stone base.

KEOKUK DIED IN 1848

"Sacred to the Memory of Keokuck," we can read on the east face, "a distinguished Sac chief, born at Rock Island in 1788, Died in April, 1848." Even the death of the red man was more than a century ago. Note that the memorial adds a "c" to the spelling of the name, a letter commonly omitted. This carving is upon a marble slab, seemingly a tombstone lifted from an earlier position and location.

"This monument is erected by popular subscription in memory of the Sac Chief Keokuk, for whom this city is named," is on another face of the pedestal. "In 1883, his remains, together with the marble slab on the reverse side of this die, were brought from Franklin county, Kansas, where he died and was buried. His grave was located about 3½ miles southeast of the village of Pomona, Franklin County, Kansas, on the S. E. ¼ of the . . . E. ½ of Section 16, Township 17, Range 18, east of the 6th Principal Meridian, and was covered by the slab above mentioned. His remains, with other matter of historical value, are deposited in the base of the structure."

Having his name, dates and places recorded, shall we now characterize the chief as a man, by reading, in bronze, what he said?

“Keokuk’s Speech in 1812, which made him a War Chief: ‘I have heard with sorrow that you have determined to leave our village and cross the Mississippi merely because you have been told that the Americans were coming in this direction. Would you leave our village, desert our homes and fly before an enemy approaches? Would you leave all, even the graves of our fathers, to the mercy of the enemy, without trying to defend them? Give me charge of your warriors and I will defend the village while you sleep!’ ”

A D.A.R. INSIGNIA

The Insignia of the D.A.R. heads the story of the origin and sponsorship of the project to obtain this striking memorial. “This bronze statue of Chief Keokuk was erected by popular subscription through the efforts of the Keokuk Chapter, Daughters of the American Revolution. Unveiled October 22, 1913. Susie Smythe Collier, chairman, Jane Ewing Blood, Anne B. Davis, Florence Curtis Diver, Lida Hiller Lapsley, Minnie Beardsley Newcomb, Winona Evans Reeves, Marcia Jenkins Sawyer.” Several of these ladies are still living in Keokuk, still active in the work of the D. A. R.

The memory of early white settlers is added on the last panel of the statue’s base. “To the Memory of the Pioneers who entered Iowa by Keokuk, the Gate City, and either settling in our state, or passing farther west, travelled over the well-known road known as the Mormon Trail. With this tablet the Daughters of the American Revolution of Iowa officially open the marking of that important pioneer highway. ‘They crossed the prairies as of old, The Pilgrims crossed the sea, To make the West as they the East, The Homestead of the free.’ Erected October twenty second, nineteen hundred and thirteen.” This is followed by the D. A. R. emblem a spinning wheel.

BOULDER MARKERS

Close by the monument we will halt before two boulders, near the n. e. corner of the park. Turning our backs upon the river landscape, we learn from one, "U. S. A., Philippine Islands, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Spanish War Veterans' Assn., 1898-1902, Army, Navy." The other reads: "In Memoriam, U. S. S. Maine, Destroyed in Havana Harbor, Feb. 15th, 1898. This tablet cast from metal recovered from U. S. S. Maine." This was "Presented by Keokuk Chapter, D. A. R., June 14, 1916."

Our car next halts at the former Senior, now Junior High School at 15th and Main streets. At the Main street entrance is a tablet dedicated Oct. 2, 1929, presented by the Women's Relief Corps, with the text of Lincoln's famous Gettysburg address.

NATIONAL CEMETERY

On to the beautiful wooded hill in the National cemetery. Here is a metal box, with a wired glass top, within which lies the old cornerstone from the Estes hotel. A bronze label reads: "Corner Stone of the Old Estes House, Fifth and Main, Keokuk, Iowa. Site of Army Hospital, April 17, 1862—Oct. 1, 1865. Erected to the memory of the soldiers who died at the old General Hospital at Keokuk and are buried in the National Cemetery." Miss Marcia Wescott, now Mrs. John Duis Buss, of Hamilton, was chosen to officiate at the dedication of this memorial because she is a descendant of Estes, for whom the hotel was named. This cornerstone was taken from its original location and here re-dedicated in 1929. Flanking the winding road to this marker are bronze plaques with patriotic quotations, and on the wall of the custodian's office building appears the Gettysburg address. Round-about are the individual stones of servicemen of the Civil war, both Union and Confederate, and of the patriots of later wars.

Back to the business center, where at the corner of Main and Fifth, and facing the latter, the site of the former Estes House is marked. A shoe store now oc-

cupies this corner and its walls bear the plate: "The Estes House, used as a hospital for soldiers of the Civil war, April 17, 1862—October 1, 1865, occupied this site. This tablet was erected by the Daughters of Union Veterans of '61-'65."

We come now to the library, pass its 1881 cornerstone, and view the huge bas relief of "Return of Iowa Soldiers, 1865," a gift of C. P. Birge, in the entrance hall.

AT VICTORY PARK

Down the hill we ride to Victory park, on the river front, "Dedicated to all those brave men and women who served their country in time of war, 1948." A bronze plate on a large red boulder reads, "1861—G.A.R.—1865. One country, one flag, one language. Erected by Torrense Post No. 2, Dept. of Iowa, 1923." A smaller boulder is "Erected in memory of the soldiers of the Civil War who embarked from this spot, 1861-65, by the Auxiliary of Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War, Dept. of Iowa, October 1929."

A beautiful drinking fountain perpetuates the name of "Theodore F. Baldwin, 2nd Lt., Co. D., 114th Iowa Inf., Civil War, 1834-1922, a Pioneer of Keokuk."

We began our tour with a bronze statue of a red man and we end it with a bronze statue of a white man, both in river-view settings. Here is the equestrian model of Gen. Samuel Curtis, 1803-1866, who served in the Mexican and Civil wars. The pedestal lists the Iowa companies and regiments in which Keokuk men served during the Civil war, as the memorial, erected by the City of Keokuk, when J. L. Root was mayor, has the purpose to honor them all.

IOWA'S ONLY NATIONAL CEMETERY

From October 1861—almost 93 years ago—when Pat Sullivan of the 9th Iowa regiment died in the old Estes House hospital here, to the present time, a total of 1,677 persons have been buried in Keokuk's National cemetery, the only one of its kind in Iowa and the scene of Memorial Day services since they were first ordered by Gen. John Logan in 1868.

Although most of those buried here are military personnel, there also are four civilians as well as 65 wives and 43 children of soldiers.

882 UNION VETERANS

Interment records in the office of Supt. A. McLellan show one veteran of the Mexican war, 882 Union and 8 Confederate soldiers of the Civil war, 135 from the Spanish American war, 13 from the Indian wars in the West who were shipped here when Fort Yates, N. D., was abandoned in 1908, almost 300 from World War I, 191 from World War II, four from the Korean war, and 25 army and navy men without war service.

Forty-nine are unidentified, 48 of them dating back to the Civil War and one from World War II.

THE UNKNOWN SOLDIERS

The grave of the last "Unknown Soldier" has been marked with a bronze wreath by Keokuk Chieftain chapter of the American War Dads.

A monument to the other 48 was erected by the Women's Relief Corps in 1912 and shows a Union soldier, standing at parade rest, on the top of a stone shaft.

Another marker of significance is the cornerstone of the old Estes House, largest of five military hospitals which were operated in Keokuk during the Civil war. It was moved to the cemetery in 1929 when the Estes House at Fifth and Main was razed for a modern business block.

CITY DONATED LAND

It was because of the Estes House and four other hospitals here that the National cemetery was established on September 23, 1861 when the city donated the first parcel of land to the federal government for that purpose. It was not until July 17, 1862, however, that congress formally accepted the cemetery as a federal institution.

During the Civil war Keokuk was the gateway to the South and the point of embarkation of all Iowa regiments en route to the battle fields. The wounded

were also brought back to Keokuk by steamboat for treatment in the hospitals here.

The National cemetery now is a four-acre plot adjoining Oakland cemetery and entered through an ornamental iron gate swung from stone columns. The gate is a part of an old iron picket fence, made in Keokuk, which formerly enclosed the entire cemetery.

70 FOOT FLAGPOLE

Near the entrance is a circular roadway centered by a 70 foot flagpole and a sunken garden from which brownstone flagged steps lead to all parts of the ground.

Graves of World Wars I and II and Korean dead are at the left of the entrance while those from earlier wars are buried toward the western border. All are marked by simple, white marble headstones.

Clayton Hart was the first superintendent of the cemetery and A. McClellan, who succeeded Paul Porter in April of 1953, now is in charge.

Hot Air Line Projected Across Iowa

In the 1850's there was great agitation in Iowa over the proposed building of a railroad called the Philadelphia, Fort Wayne & Pacific Air Line, which was to cross Southern Iowa, on its sweep of the whole country. In many communities bonds were actually voted in support of the project; also stock was subscribed and money raised. But the whole project went down in the panic of 1857, or soon after.

At Knoxville, Iowa, 40 citizens had subscribed for stock in the company, so it was reported January 27, 1853. A referendum was held in Marion county on January 14, 1854, and a proposal to issue bonds by the county in support of the railroad project was voted down. At another county seat a gift of depot grounds was tendered to the promoters of the company.

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