



Very Truly
R. Noble

THE LATE HON. REUBEN NOBLE, OF M'GREGOR, CLAYTON COUNTY.
Speaker of the Iowa House of Representatives, 1854-56; Judge Tenth Judicial
District, 1875-79.

REUBEN NOBLE.

BY T. H. STUDEBAKER.

There are men whose lives stand out in bold relief among their fellows. As one tall tree towers above all others of the forest, they lift their heads far above those who surround them. Such men leave a lasting impression upon all with whom they associate in life. Their influence is never negative, but always positive. They "stamp improvement on the wings of time." They are not content to travel in the old ruts, but seek for better paths in which to journey. They are ambitious, but their ambition is not ephemeral; rather the result of mature reason. Such a character was Reuben Noble.

His father, Henry Noble, was born in Maryland, October, 1772, and was of English parentage. When twenty-three years of age he removed to the state of Mississippi, where in 1799 he married Mary Swazy, a native of that state and of Irish descent. Henry Noble was a well-informed man, and kept close watch of the stirring events of his time. He was a regular reader of "*Niles' Register*," a very ably edited periodical published at Baltimore, Maryland. He was the father of twelve children, of whom Reuben was the last one living. Henry Noble, on account of his anti-slavery sentiments removed to Jersey county, Illinois, when our subject was twelve years of age. He died there at the advanced age of seventy-nine years.

Reuben first saw the light of day near Natchez, Mississippi, April 14, 1821. Here among the sunny fields of this flowery South land, he passed the first years of his life, when, as stated above, he came with his parents to Jersey county, Illinois.

Of course in those early days educational advantages were not of the best, and our subject only attended school three months after he was twelve years of age. He worked

on his father's farm until he was eighteen years old, when he decided to make the law his profession. He was only a little past twenty-one when admitted to the bar. In the spring of 1842 he came to Fair Play, Wisconsin, where he began practicing his profession, and also engaged to some extent in mining. But hearing of the rich prairies of Clayton county, he removed thither, and in October, 1843, opened a law office in Jacksonville, now Garnavillo. He at once determined to make this his home. On the 19th of June, 1844, he was married to Harriet C. Douglass, of Jersey county, Illinois. He continued the practice of the law at Garnavillo until 1857, when he removed to McGregor, which continued to be his home until his death, which occurred August 8, 1896.

As stated above, his educational advantages had been very limited. But the subject of this sketch early evinced a desire for learning. During the three years of his life from eighteen to twenty-one, in addition to his preparation for the law, he also acquired some knowledge of Latin and also of literature and science in general. With this, however, he was not content, but continued a student not only of law, but of knowledge in general to the day of his death, and was regarded as a well educated person. He was an exceptionally well-informed man.

In his boyhood days he had acquired a practical knowledge of agriculture, and when he beheld the rich prairies of Clayton county stretching before him in all their richness and grandeur, the love for agriculture was greatly increased. Hence it was that shortly after coming to Clayton county, he became the possessor of a farm, and was ever after a liberal patron of agriculture with all its kindred branches. He read agricultural papers, and was frequently a contributor to the press on subjects of interest in this direction. He also gave some attention to mining, and helped develop some of the lead mines of the county.

But he was first of all a lawyer, and bent to the mastery of his chosen profession with an untiring devotion. For this profession he was peculiarly adapted both by nature and

training. He applied himself to the law with such energy and perseverance that he soon came to be recognized as one of the foremost lawyers of Northeastern Iowa, and was consulted and retained by a numerous clientage over a large territory. In the practice of his profession he had a distinct individuality. When he grappled with the intricacies of a knotty legal question, he went at it with full confidence and self-reliance. Of a rugged constitution, he shrank from no task however difficult, and applied himself to unravel the mystery with confidence, and a full determination to become perfect master of the case in hand. It should be said, however, that he seemed to have adopted one of Blackstone's principles of law as his guide, viz: that "Man should live honestly, should hurt nobody, and render to every one his just dues." This was the rule of his life in everything. Did he find upon thorough investigation of a cause that there was no need of a lawsuit that might make life-long enemies and pile up costs to no purpose—he at once addressed himself to bring about a compromise. It may be truthfully said that he often carried this idea of compromise to the extent of financial loss to himself. But his innate love of peace was always sufficient reason for him to make the sacrifice. In the study and preparation of a case, he confined himself not to his office and books alone, but he was a student of human nature. He carefully studied the people with whom he came in contact, and the knowledge thus acquired gave him a great advantage when impaneling a jury, or in pleading before them. He possessed in a high degree the power of grasping the strong points of his case. For trickery and cunning in the conduct of court trials he had only contempt, and hesitated not to call down upon the heads of those using such methods the vengeance of his disapproving honesty.

His prominence as a lawyer—of which mention will be made later on—soon brought him into active political life. The Whig party came into power in the State in 1854, and upon the Freesoil ticket Mr. Noble was elected a member of the general assembly from Clayton county, and was chosen speaker of the house for the regular session and also for the

extra session, held in 1855. In this important and trying position, he performed the duties of a presiding officer in an impartial manner, and won the respect and confidence of his colleagues as well as of the people of the State. It must be remembered that these were trying times. Mutterings of discontent and even disunion were heard on all sides. Events were then shaping themselves for the bloody war that came upon the Nation five years later. Amid these murmurings of discontent, and when the black cloud of war hovered over the Nation like a pall, his voice was raised in defense of the Union and in opposition to secession and rebellion. He hated and abhorred war, but he would not consent to peace purchased at the cost of honor. Hence he was found in the front rank of those whose voices were raised in opposition to the encroachments of slavery upon the people of the North. He believed in the Union, and would not consent to a dissolution. His positive views on this burning issue made him a delegate to the National Republican Convention at Chicago which nominated Lincoln in 1860. Of this honor he always felt a just pride. All through the dark days of the rebellion, he clung to his belief in the cause of union against secession, and when the southern confederacy went down with the surrender at Appomattox, no man rejoiced more heartily. The attempted impeachment of Johnson and the period of reconstruction, wrought in him a change, and caused him to unite with the Democratic party, with which party he affiliated to the close of his life.

It should be said here, however, that toward the close of the sixties he was called upon by a delegation from Dubuque headed by William B. Allison, and urged to accept the nomination for congress on the Republican ticket. He, however, declined the honor. His reason was, that he had through the failure of several parties with whom he was associated in a business venture, become responsible for a large debt. While he was not legally bound to pay the debt amounting to many thousands of dollars, his sense of honor would never permit him to allow his name to be dishonored by refusing to pay what he regarded as a moral obligation. He went

to work with increased vigor. He worked longer hours, and practiced the most rigid economy, till the last dollar was paid, both principal and interest. A most striking example of his high-souled integrity.

In 1874 he was elected judge of the tenth—now thirteenth—judicial district, and was re-elected in 1878, but resigned before the end of his term. On the bench his abilities as a lawyer were most apparent. He proved himself not only a strictly impartial judge, but careful and painstaking in all his judicial work. His long years of close application and constant toil prepared him for this field of high usefulness, and he shrank from no labor or responsibility incident to its duties. He won the respect and confidence of the bar and of all with whom he came in contact. He was twice nominated for supreme judge, declining the first, and to the second he paid no attention whatever.

After his resignation as district judge, he formed a partnership with Hon. Thomas Updegraff for the practice of law in McGregor, and carried on the work of the office during Mr. Updegraff's first two terms in congress. This partnership was dissolved about the year 1890, Mr. Noble retaining the business of attorney for the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railway Co., which position he held at the time of his death. He was also associated during his residence at McGregor with the late Judge Hatch, and together they conducted some of the most important cases tried in the courts of Iowa. That he loved his profession is evidenced by the fact that he never missed a session of court in his county during his entire residence in Iowa. It seemed almost a thing impossible to hold court without him.

While his life-work was the law, he also took an active part in politics, and was regarded as one of the most able and convincing political speakers in the State. His work in politics brought him in touch with the leading men of his party, not only in his own State but in others as well. In politics as in law he hated dishonesty and trickery, and never would consent to the gaining of political advantage by questionable means.

His home life was such as to be admired. Coming to Iowa when settlers were few, the spontaneous, generous hospitality of the early pioneers became the rule of his every day life. At his home the "latch-string" was always out. He welcomed his friends with that hearty, cordial greeting which made them perfectly at home.

Three sons grew to manhood, two of whom have become leading lawyers in their States, while the other became a first-class locomotive engineer. He was also blessed with two highly cultivated daughters, who, together with the three sons and an adopted daughter, who was devotedly attached to him, compose a family of children of whom any father would be justly proud.

Resolutions of respect were adopted at the ensuing term of the District Court of Clayton county, upon which occasion eloquent eulogies were pronounced upon the life and character of Judge Noble, by Hon. Messrs. Samuel Murdock and James O. Crosby, who had been his associates at the bar and his intimate personal friends for fully fifty years. A like expression was adopted by the bar of Fayette county, the resolutions having been prepared by a committee of which Hon. L. L. Ainsworth was chairman. The press of his own county, as well as throughout the State, united in high testimonials to his upright character and usefulness as a citizen, and to his great ability as a jurist and statesman. It was felt that in his death the State had lost one of the best men who had been spared to this generation from pioneer times. Upon the assembling of the legislature in the extra session of 1897, a committee consisting of Hon. Messrs. T. J. Sullivan, Thomas F. Nolan and Samuel Mayne, was appointed by the speaker of the house of representatives to report resolutions expressive of the sense of public loss sustained in his death. The following preamble and resolutions were submitted by the committee and adopted by a rising vote:

MR. SPEAKER.—Your committee to draft resolutions on the death of Hon. Reuben Noble, beg leave to submit the following report:

WHEREAS, An all-wise Providence has removed from this transitory life JUDGE REUBEN NOBLE, full of years and honors, to a better and more certain existence.

WHEREAS, Judge Noble was one of the sturdy pioneers of early Iowa who was largely responsible for the commanding position our State occupies today among her sister States.

And, as he was not only identified with the early material development of our State, but was one of the influential pioneer law-makers and was an active member of that honorable organization, known as the Pioneer Law-makers of Iowa, at the time of his death; now therefore, be it

Resolved, as follows: That we recognize the commanding influence for good of such a positive and aggressive character as Judge Noble. That we fully appreciate and regret the loss to Iowa in the death of such a man. That we tender to his family our sincere and lasting sympathy for their irreparable loss. That we extend to his surviving associates in the Pioneer Law-makers' association of Iowa our sympathy and affection, and with the hope while the years go by and the little band of Iowa's early law-makers grows smaller and smaller that they may ever cherish and revere the memory of Judge Reuben Noble, of Clayton county, a man that lived in one county for nearly one-half a century without reproach. That the clerk of this house shall send to Mrs. Reuben Noble at McGregor, Iowa, a copy of these resolutions.

T. J. SULLIVAN,
THOS. F. NOLAN,
SAMUEL MAYNE.

AARON W. HARLAN, aged eighty-six years, who was one of the first men to sell goods in Keosauqua, where he kept a store in the early days of this town, but whose home has been at Croton, Lee county, for a long time, was a visitor here Tuesday and Wednesday. In the early part of 1841, Edwin Manning loaded a flat-boat at Keosauqua with pork and other saleable products, and started it to New Orleans, with Mr. Harlan in charge. It was a long float, but that city was reached without accident in the month of May. This was the only flat-boat that made the entire trip from out the Des Moines to the Crescent City. Uncle Aaron was a scout in the secret service of the United States during the war of the rebellion and also served in the Mexican war. He is still quite vigorous.—*Keosauqua Republican*, April 15, 1897.

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.