



MR. AND MRS. WILLSON ALEXANDER SCOTT
(From a daguerreotype.)

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WILLSON ALEXANDER SCOTT

BY IDA M. HUNTINGTON

Among the earliest as well as most active and enterprising settlers of the frontier town of Fort Des Moines was Willson Alexander Scott,¹ familiarly known as "Aleck" Scott. His pioneering proclivities were undoubtedly inherited, as his forefathers for several generations had migrated from place to place, keeping ever well to the front in the advance of civilization. His great-great-grandfather, Andrew Scott, emigrated from Scotland to America in 1725, settling in York County, Pennsylvania. Here a son, John, was born about 1734 and a grandson, John, in 1763. These two moved to Virginia, where in May, 1780, the younger John, at the age of seventeen years, enlisted in the Revolutionary War from Washington County, in the regiment of Colonel William Gamble, and served one year, participating in the battles of Kings Mountain and Wetzells Mills. When the war was over he married Nancy Keith and became the father of nine sons and five daughters. With part or all of this family he migrated to Illinois, stopping for a while on the way in Tennessee, Kentucky and Indiana. He reached Illinois in 1824 when over sixty years of age, and located in Island Grove Township, Sangamon County.

Several members of his family, including his oldest son, Andrew, a son James, and a son-in-law, Samuel Glenn, also settled in Sangamon County and entered land in Island Grove Township. James Scott and Samuel Glenn afterward removed to DeWitt County and both represented that county at some time in the Illinois legislature.

¹Genealogical records and personal correspondence were furnished by Mrs. Mary L. Mendenhall, Springfield, Illinois, a niece of Mr. Scott's. Mrs. Mendenhall has kindly assisted in every possible way in the preparation of this sketch.

Andrew Scott remained in Sangamon County until his death in 1859 and was one of the influential men of the community. He had identified himself early in life with the reform movement begun by Thomas and Alexander Campbell, and did all he could to establish helpful and uplifting influences in the new community in which he had settled. He worked on his farm week days and spent his Sundays organizing churches and officiating at funerals and weddings. It is said that he officiated at the first marriage in Island Grove Township. The first schoolhouse in that locality was built on his farm and a church soon followed it. All the preachers who held services in the church and the teachers who taught in the schoolhouse made his house their temporary home. This farm has never gone out of the ownership of the Scott family.

Willson² Alexander Scott, son of Andrew, was born November 20, 1818, in Crawford County, Indiana, where the family made a stay of several years on their way from Virginia to Illinois. His early life was lived amid pioneer surroundings and his early education obtained in the schoolhouse on his father's farm in Illinois. A "Schedule of a Common School kept by William Simpson³ in July, 1839," shows Wilson A. Scott as one of six Scott children in attendance. The attendance of the three girls, Lucinda, Dorinda, and Melinda was nearly perfect, while that of the three boys, Willson, Caleb, and John, would indicate that it was the busy season of the year and their services were needed on the farm. As Willson was in his twenty-first year at this time, his attendance at school was probably much interrupted.

Later it is thought he attended Illinois College, one of the first colleges established in the West, founded by the "Yale Band" of eastern professors in 1829 at Jacksonville, Illinois. He also studied higher mathematics and surveying and occasionally practiced the latter occupation.

Possessed by the same spirit of adventure and love of pioneer life that animated his forefathers, James L. Scott, older brother of Willson A., migrated about 1837 to the newly opened terri-

²His signatures show both forms of spelling, "Wilson" and "Willson."

³William Simpson was a Scotchman, quite an original character and considered a wonderful teacher. It is said he could have several classes on the floor reciting at the same time and detect any error made. He was studying medicine and was betrothed to one of the older Scott girls, who was broken-hearted at his untimely death at Lexington, Kentucky, April 9, 1842.

tory of Iowa and settled in Jefferson County where he became an active factor in the life of the community. He acted as bidder for some of the Jefferson County squatters at the land sales at Burlington in November, 1838, was commissioned sheriff by Governor Lucas in September, 1839, and at the first election in Jefferson County was elected sheriff. In 1839 he was married to Mary A. Gilmer.⁴

Mr. and Mrs. James L. Scott were soon joined by a cousin, John B. Scott, from De Witt County, Illinois, and by their younger brother, Willson A. Scott. On February 1, 1841, James L. Scott wrote to his father, Andrew Scott, and after finishing his letter to him, added postscripts to other members of the family as was the custom of that time. One of these postscripts was to W. A. Scott, congratulating him on his "doing so well," but not specifying in what way. He was evidently still at home at this date. A promissory note dated a little over a month later, March 6, 1841, payable to Presley A. Saunders, of Mt. Pleasant, Iowa, and signed "Wilson A. _____" would indicate that he had reached Iowa in the intervening time. A letter written by one of the Scott girls to her brothers, James L. and Willson A. Scott, dated May 5, 1842, and directed to Fairfield, Iowa, is evidence of that being his address, although he may have been exploring other parts of the state. His brother-in-law was heard to say frequently that Aleck Scott was the first white man to stand on the site of Des Moines.

Very little is known of his movements until he settled in Fort Des Moines. Captain James Allen of Company I, First U. S. Dragoons, came up the Des Moines River from Fort Sandford in a little steamer and landed some of his men with their baggage and stores on the 9th day of May, 1843. On the 20th day of May his entire company of dragoons landed and went into camp at the chosen site, and were joined the next day by Captain J. R. B. Gardenier with Company F of the First Infantry. Here they were to erect a fort and other buildings necessary to establish themselves. Their purpose was the protection of the Sac and Fox Indians against the incursions of the white settlers until the expiration of the time granted the Indians by the treaty of

⁴Western Historical Company, "History of Jefferson County, Iowa," 1879, pp. 367, 395, 420.

1842 for the use of these lands as hunting grounds. Of necessity food for the men and provender for the horses must be raised or traded for, and a few white men were allowed within the limits of the Fort and to settle near by in the capacity of artisans, farmers and traders. Willson Alexander Scott and John B. Scott of Jefferson County, his cousin, were among those who obtained these special permits, were granted claims, and contracted to raise corn, hay and other farm products for the garrison. A copy of the contract made with John B. Scott gives the terms and conditions under which they worked:

The said J. B. Scott shall be permitted to open and cultivate a farm in the Indian country to embrace at least one section of land of 640 acres, the said farm to be selected by the said Scott at any place not nearer than one mile of the said military post from any single body of land not appropriated to the purposes of the said military post, or for the Indian villages or the licensed trading houses in the country. The said Scott to enjoy the use and the benefit of the said farm until the time that the Indians shall have left the country agreeably to their late treaty with the United States to remove south of the Missouri River; provided that the said Scott shall from time to time faithfully execute all his agreements of this contract and provided further that he shall not violate any law of the United States regulating trade and intercourse in the Indian country nor any proper regulation of the said military post or order of the commanding officer.⁵

They also carried on an extensive trade with the Indians and built their log trading post on the east side of the river near what is now Court Avenue. The Fort was situated on the point between the Des Moines and Raccoon rivers, the gardens of the soldiers lay along the north and south banks of the Raccoon and the farmers and settlers were located on the east side of the Des Moines River.

In his double capacity of trader and farmer, Aleck Scott was engaged until the removal of the Indians to their lands in Kansas was effected, when he went with them as a trader. Lieutenant Grier, who was in charge of the Fort, had sent Lieutenant Noble up the Des Moines River in search of a band of Indians who, to avoid being forced to leave, had scattered. They were found in poor condition for the transfer. In a letter dated March 7, 1846, Lieutenant Grier wrote: "Mr. Scott, one of their trad-

⁵Porter's "Annals of Polk County and City of Des Moines," 1898, p. 105.

ers, supplied them with provisions but was not willing to furnish transportation, and I directed the A. A. quartermaster to do so."⁶

When at noon on March 10, 1846, the Fort was vacated by the soldiers, Fort Des Moines ceased to exist as a military post. Land entries were permitted and the settlers rushed in to take possession. Aleck Scott returned and purchased five hundred acres of land on the east side of the river. This land was eventually to become the principal part of the East Side of the City of Des Moines. Here, just south of the hill now known as Capitol Hill, Mr. Scott built his double log cabin. A double log cabin in those days consisted of two log houses, one serving as a dwelling and the other as a stable, with a roofed space connecting them, used as a shelter for wagons, machinery, etc. Old settlers remember when his cornfields spread over the territory now occupied by the business streets of the East Side.

Apparently he again associated in business with John B. Scott. On December 18, 1846, his brother, James L. Scott, wrote home as follows:

We heard from W. A. and J. B. Scott about three weeks ago. Mr. Lewis, the old gentleman you will recollect that superintended the feeding of their horses the fall you were out, has been with them ever since Eleck was here this spring, called and stayed all night with us and gave us information of and about them. He says they received ten thousand dollars in boxes and got some three or four thousand dollars by trade this payment. The payment came off the 26th of October, later than they expected by over a month. This I suppose is the reason that Eleck has not been over. We have never received a letter from them since one directly after Eleck got home from here this spring, but they sent Mr. Lewis to see me so everything is about safe and I think from Mr. Lewis' report to me they are by this time on sure footing.

The question of crossing the rivers began and continued to be of great importance in the history of the town. In the first years small boats had been used for the carrying of passengers. It is recorded that John B. Scott commenced running the first ferry on May 1, 1846.⁷ Another writer states that Aleck Scott put on a flatboat ferry in 1846 and did a profitable business.⁸

⁶ANNALS OF IOWA, 3d Ser., Vol. IV, p. 176.

⁷Dixon's "Centennial History of Polk County," 1876, p. 314.

⁸Andrews' "Pioneers of Polk County," 1908, Vol. I, p. 234.

In 1847 Aleck Scott was given a license by the county commissioners to run a ferry across the Des Moines and Raccoon rivers, the seal of the commissioners affixed being a silver half dollar.⁹ In the February, 1847, term of the board of county commissioners, John B. Scott was authorized "to keep ferries across both rivers, with rates of toll as follows: Footman, 5 cents; horseman, 12½ cents; wagon and span of horses, 37½ cents. These rates apply to both rivers."¹⁰ In the April, 1848, term W. A. and J. B. Scott were allowed to keep ferries over both rivers.¹¹ The rates of toll were evidently disregarded, and during the days of the rush of emigrants to California high prices for ferriage were charged and money rolled in upon the thrifty ferrymen.

Farming and ferrying did not exhaust the energies of Mr. Scott. In January, 1847, the board of county commissioners began to plan for the erection of a courthouse, and after various plans had been considered and rejected, specifications for a two-story brick building were finally decided upon. Bids were advertised for and it was ordered that a contract be let at the January, 1848, term. W. A. Scott, W. W. Jones, W. R. Close, and John Saylor presented bids, but that of Mr. Saylor being much the lowest, the contract was awarded to him.¹² Doubtless at this time Mr. Scott was beginning the building operations which he afterward conducted with great success.

Land sales of the land obtained by the last Indian purchase were to be held at Iowa City in the fall of 1848. Previous to this time the settlers had held their lands by what was termed claim rights which, while the customary method was just in itself, was not really legal. Speculators from the East had overrun the country, looking up the most valuable lands and were eager to give higher prices for them when they came into market than the settlers could afford. This aroused the indignation of the settlers who had spent years of labor in helping make the lands valuable. They were determined to save their claims and to pay no more than the lowest government price for them if possible. All strangers endeavoring to buy lands were viewed with suspicion and many outbreaks of ill feeling occurred. It

⁹Andrews' "Pioneers of Polk County," 1908, p. 236.

¹⁰Dixon's "Centennial History of Polk County," 1876, p. 92.

¹¹Dixon's "Centennial History of Polk County," 1876, p. 94.

¹²Porter's "Annals of Polk County and City of Des Moines," 1898, p. 144.

was decided by the settlers of Polk County that an organization to protect themselves and their claims from speculators and ill-intentioned people was advisable, so on April 8, 1848, they held a meeting and drafted and adopted resolutions that should voice their opinion in regard to the matter. Among the first signatures appended to these resolutions was that of W. A. Scott. J. B. Scott was one of the committee appointed to adjust claim difficulties.¹³

In 1849 occurred the Flemming and Perkins riots in which Aleck Scott bore a brief though prominent part. Asa Flemming had a claim a few miles south of Fort Des Moines and B. Perkins tried to pre-empt it, even filing the necessary papers for that purpose. This was deemed the more despicable as both men were members of the Claims Club which had been organized to prevent strangers from doing that very thing. Flemming and his neighbors one day found Perkins near the claim in dispute, and becoming incensed, pursued and shot at him. He fled to Fort Des Moines, and there feeling himself secure swore out a warrant against Flemming, charging him with shooting with intent to kill.

Flemming was later arrested and brought before a justice for examination. While the trial was being held his friends came in a mob, broke into the office and carried him away. The suddenness of the attack and the public sentiment in his favor caused the citizens to render no resistance. But when he was again arrested, such defiance of the law was not permitted. An armed and threatening mob of his friends formed south of the Raccoon River and called for the ferryman to carry them across. Aleck Scott, the ferryman, was equal to the occasion. He coolly refused to take them across to Fort Des Moines while they were armed. They stormed and threatened, but he would not ferry them over until their guns were stacked and other weapons removed. Finding him obdurate and immovable, they finally complied with his demands and his boat was at their service. Without arms they were of course unable to cause any great amount of trouble, and what might have proved a serious chapter in the history of the town was averted by the sagacity of Mr. Scott.¹⁴

¹³Turrill's "Historical Reminiscences of the City of Des Moines," 1857, p. 29.

¹⁴Turrill's "Historical Reminiscences of the City of Des Moines," 1857, p. 38.

After the organization of the town of Fort Des Moines, the town council had considerable altercation with Mr. Scott in regard to the ferries. The council felt that some revenue therefrom should accrue to the town. Mr. Scott claimed that he had obtained from old Chief Keokuk a perpetual commission to ferry across both rivers. For two years the council tried various methods to win their point. Finally an agreement was made that Mr. Scott should put in a float bridge, connecting Sycamore Street, now Grand Avenue, on the west side with Keokuk Street, now Grand Avenue, on the east side of the river. This did not prove a success for it was too long when the river was low and too short during the high water season. Mr. Scott therefore continued his ferries for some eight or ten years longer. Then he built the first trestle bridge over the Des Moines River at Market Street. This bridge was never very satisfactory and was destroyed in the freshet of 1859.¹⁵

Mr. Scott apparently continued living in his double log cabin south of Capitol Hill until 1849. In that year he launched out in the real estate business, and the *Iowa Star* of November 2, 1849,¹⁶ contains this brief paragraph: "Messrs. Buckingham, Dean and Scott commenced the survey of their addition to Fort Des Moines today. This addition is on the east bank of the Des Moines River directly opposite town, and well situated for business. We learn the lots will be in market soon."

Fort Des Moines as originally platted July 8, 1846, was bounded on the east by Water Street, on the west by Eighth Street, on the north by Locust street and on the south by Elm Street. Scott and Dean's addition to Fort Des Moines, East Side, seems to have been the first addition to the original plat and was made November 19, 1849. Records in the Polk County recorder's office give the plat of the addition and the filing agreement subscribed to by W. A. and Luesa Scott, his wife, John S. Dean and Nancy Dean, his wife.¹⁷

Some time previous to this date Mr. Scott had married the widow of an Indian interpreter who had been a friend of his.

¹⁵Andrews' "Pioneers of Polk County," 1908, p. 236.

¹⁶Newspaper Collections, Historical Department of Iowa, Des Moines.

¹⁷Village Plats, Book A, p. 102.

Mrs. Luesa Jayne was of French and Indian parentage, an exceedingly attractive woman, a good housekeeper, and noted for her taste in dress.

When the California gold excitement reached Fort Des Moines it had quite an effect upon the town. Many of the emigrant trains passed along this route and trade was brisk. Returns from the ferry business were also heavy. Mr. Scott fitted out different companies of emigrants and is thought to have made two trips to California himself. The following letter written by his brother describes the start of one of the expeditions which he is said to have fitted out and accompanied:

St. Francis,¹⁸ Iowa, April 24, 1850.

Dear Father and Mother,

I take the present moment to write you a letter to let you know how we are getting along with our California expedition. On the eighth of April we started and arrived at Fort Des Moines on the fifteenth without any particular difficulty. We had bad roads, it is true, but that we expected. We found Alex well and making from forty to fifty dollars per day. He has fitted out five men for the expedition; we are looking for them. When we got to Fort Des Moines we found grain \$1.50 to \$2.00 per bushel, but fortunately for us we wrote to Alex some time previous to secure our grain for us, which he did at 35c per bushel.

We started from Fort Des Moines the 17th and arrived here the 23rd without accident and intend leaving tomorrow. When we arrived here we found that grain was worth \$1.50 to \$2.50 per bushel and we paid \$2.00 per hundred for hay; for our grain at this place we pay from \$1.50 to \$1.75.

For the want of more time I shall have to conclude. I have many things that I would like to write if I had time. I would just state that James is along and well. We have both enjoyed good health since we started.

I want you all to render yourselves as easy on my account as possible, for just know that I will take care of myself. I want you to write in about six weeks and direct to Sacramento City. For the want of time I must conclude. I remain,

Yours etc.

C. L. SCOTT.

To Mr. Andrew Scott,
Berlin, Sangamon Co. Illinois.
(Mailed at Nebraska, Iowa, April 29, 1850)

¹⁸St. Francis, sometimes called Trader's Point, was on the Missouri River and a few miles below Kanessville, now Council Bluffs.—Editor.

The other expedition left Des Moines on May 12, 1852, and on this trip Mr. Scott was accompanied by his wife. A brief letter to his father and family, with both names appended, tells of their start and gives a little information regarding his farm:

Nebraska Territory, May 23, 1852.

Dear Father and Mother and Sisters,

We embrace this opportunity of writing you a few lines to inform you that we are all well at present and hope these few lines may come to hand and find you enjoying the same blessing. We left Ft. Des Moin on the 12th inst. at ten o'clock, and crossed the Missouri river on the twenty-second inst. at four o'clock and camped here on Clear Lake, two and a half miles from the ferry. I have nothing of importance to write. I shall write to Hews relative to my farm. I want him if it will suit his convenience to come on to my farm as I only rented it for the present season. I have enclosed one hundred acres of land and if he wants to have more land by making about three thousand rails he can enclose a hundred acres more. * * * I shall write every opportunity from here to California and after we get there we will write you again.

W. A. & L. SCOTT.

I left our likeness in the trunk with some things that we left for Hews.

W. A. S.

Probably the "likeness" to which he refers is the one accompanying this article. He probably made only a short stay in California at this time.

The location of the capital of Iowa at Iowa City did not long remain satisfactory to the people, and as early as 1847 the necessity of re-location became apparent. The question was agitated for some years. About midway between the present towns of Monroe and Prairie City, Jasper County, was actually selected by a commission appointed by the First General Assembly and town lots staked off, some of them sold, and the place named Monroe City, but the commission's report was not adopted by the assembly and the site was abandoned. Bills were introduced in various assemblies at other times favoring Fort Des Moines and Pella. In 1855 a bill fixing the capital within two miles of the Raccoon Forks was passed by a decided majority.

On October 30, 1855, Mr. Scott and his wife wrote back to his family, urging them to come west, describing their prosper-

ity and the advantages of the town in glowing colors, and making mention of the capital:

Ft. Des Moin, Oct. 30, 1855.

Dear Father and sisters,

I avail myself of this opportunity of writing you a few lines to inform you that we are well and hope these few lines may come to hand and find you all enjoying the same blessing.

I have been improving this summer. I have put me up a brick house, 42 feet by 18, two stories high and an ell running back 28 feet by 16, two stories high with a cellar under it. I have the brick work completed and shall commence enclosing it tomorrow. I have also laid out 270 acres of my land into town lots. On the 26th day of November I shall sell some two or three hundred lots. I would like to see you all very well, but it will be out of my power to come to see you this winter I expect.

I think it probably would be a good plan for you to sell off your loose stock and rent your farm and come out here and live. If you should take a notion to do so I will give you some of the finest building lots you ever saw. You could live much easier and more contented I think than you can to stay there. * * * This is a great deal better country than that and it is destined to make the best place in the state. The capital of the state will be located here next spring, sure. * * * I think it would be the best thing Hews could do to come out here and buy some lots and go into business in the spring. I think it is the grandest opening for a business man that I ever saw. * * *

W. A. & L. SCOTT.

In a letter dated December 30th of the same year, he again urged his father to make his home with him, and further describes the fine brick house:

I see from your letter that you are left in a lonely situation and must be a very unpleasant one for you, but it appears to me that if you will accept my offer that you can be very pleasantly situated. It is my wish and desire that you should arrange your business against spring and come and live with me the balance of your days. I am truly glad that I am so situated that I can extend you the invitation and be able to make you comfortable and happy in your old days. * * *

About affairs at home. I have built me a two story brick building. It has nine rooms in it. I have not got it finished off yet. I am living in the ell part of it. I will have it all finished off early in the spring. I have laid off about one thousand lots which range at about one hundred and fifty dollars. I shall build very extensively next season. * * *

Again on March 2, 1856, he wrote of his business:

I think this a great deal better country [for] young people to make

money in than that old country for the facilities are greater. I have laid out upwards of eight hundred lots and I am selling from one hundred to three hundred dollars per lot and they will double that in one year in my opinion, and if the capitol should come on my side they would more than do that.

As was the custom at that time, many inducements were held out to the state by public-spirited citizens. W. A. Scott was a member of a private association composed of James A. Williamson, Joseph M. Griffiths, Dr. Alex Shaw, Dr. T. K. Brooks, Harrison and Alfred M. Lyons and others, which was organized in 1855 for the purpose of erecting the capitol.¹⁹ Mr. Scott platted and filed for record on January 30, 1856, the "Town of De Moine," all of which was on the east side of the river and extended from Court Avenue to the river and from the river on the west to East Twelfth Street on the east.²⁰ On June 3, 1856, he platted and filed for record "Scott's Addition to Town of Demoine," which included the present capitol site.²¹ He donated ten and two-tenth acres of this finest land on the East Side, now known as Capitol Hill, to the state.²² This organization of men then built the first capitol in Des Moines, just south of where the present building now stands, and rented it to the state for a nominal sum.

A sister who was visiting W. A. Scott at this time thus wrote to her father on May 12, 1856, dating her letter at "Demoine city":

¹⁹Porter's "Annals of Polk County and City of Des Moines," 1898, p. 175.

²⁰Village Plats, Book A, p. 189.

²¹Village Plats, Book A, p. 8.

²²There is on file in the Public Archives Division of the Historical Department the original report of the commissioners appointed by Governor Grimes to "relocate the seat of government of the state." These commissioners were appointed by virtue of an act of the Fifth General Assembly, approved by the governor January 25, 1855, and consisted of J. H. D. Street, Stewart Goodrell, Benjamin R. Pegram, Guy Wells, and John A. L. Crookham. The act required them to select a location within two miles of the junction of the Des Moines and Raccoon rivers. The report shows they met April 18, 1856, at Fort Des Moines (west side of river) "for the purpose of discharging the duty assigned them." They examined "the various locations situated within two miles of the junction" of said rivers and selected "a certain lot on the map of the Town of Demoine City [east side of river] in the county of Polk aforesaid, containing ten and two-tenth acres and situated on the east side of the Des Moines River, within two miles of the junction aforesaid, and thus defined, * * *. The said lot was obtained by donations without charge to the state, and in the opinion of the commissioners contains as much ground as is necessary for the capitol buildings. The commissioners have also obtained donations to the state as follows, to wit, one tract containing five and sixty-one one-hundredths acres, [Governor's Square] and one block [where East Des Moines High School Building now stands]. Having taken to their aid William H. McHenry, Esq., and Bernard Callan, competent surveyors," they surveyed and laid off these tracts, and received "proper conveyances" of them.—Editor.

The capitol is now permanently located $\frac{1}{2}$ a mile east of the junction of the Des Moines and Raccoon rivers, being on Alex's place. The 5 commissioners appointed by the governor to locate it were unanimous in their decision of the site selected. The governor has accepted the location and preparations will immediately be made to build a temporary building for the legislature to meet in this winter. Also there will be 2 fine hotels go up this summer. Alex requests me to say that he has just received from the governor specifications of the kind of a house he wants built and he is going out now to make arrangements to have it commenced immediately. He says he will write just as soon as he can get his business arranged so he can. There is about 150 houses gone up here since last season; great preparations for building this season. There was a steamboat arrival here Friday night. 2 more are on the way. The Des Moines river improvement is now all under contract. It is said to be in the hands of responsible men and men of energy, and will progress rapidly.

The citizens of Des Moines also advanced the funds necessary to remove the seat of government from Iowa City, as is evidenced by the following letter:²³

Iowa City, Aug. 27, 1857.

Hon. James W. Grimes,
Governor of the State of Iowa.

Sir;

Inasmuch as there was no provision made by the last Legislature for defraying the expense of the removal of the seat of Government from Iowa City to Des Moines in Polk Co.

I hereby agree that the funds necessary for defraying the expense of said removal shall be advanced by the citizens of Des Moines—such sum and at such time as you may require.

W. A. SCOTT.

It is related that when the first legislature met at Des Moines, accommodations for the members were scarce. Mr. Scott and other citizens opened their homes to them and entertained them with lavish expenditure. Mr. Scott's business had become so flourishing that in October, 1856, his brother, James L. Scott, had removed from Jefferson County to Des Moines to assist him. In December of that same year his sister wrote a glowing description of a "large and splendid party" given her by Alex on the occasion of her wedding.

In this year, 1857, Mr. Scott was at the height of his prosperity. Fort Des Moines was incorporated as the City of Des

²³Original letter in Public Archives Division of the Historical Department.

Iowa City Aug 27 1857

Hon James W Grimes
Governor of the State of Iowa

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Inasmuch as there was no
provision made by the last Legislature for
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the Seat of Government from Iowa City
to Fort Des Moines in Polk Co

I hereby agree that the funds necessary
for defraying the expense of said removal
shall be ~~advanced~~ ^{advanced} by the Citizens of Des Moines
Such sum and at such time as you may
require

W A Scott

Letter from W. A. Scott to Governor Grimes offering funds to remove the seat of government to Des Moines. (Original in Public Archives Division of Historical Department.)

Moines on January 28, 1857, and W. A. Scott was elected city councilman from the Seventh Ward at the election of May 4, 1857.²⁴ He was a Democrat in politics and ran for representative in the first legislature held in Des Moines, but was defeated by a relatively small number of votes. In a short note appended to one of his wife's letters to his father, he said: "We celebrated the great victory won in Illinois by S. A. Douglas the father of Illinois. We hope he will be candidate for president in '60 if Iowa will be redeemed for the democracy, and that will save the Union and that alone."

He lived in his handsome brick residence which was beautifully furnished with a piano and other articles of furniture rare in a frontier town. He was rich and generous, delighting to send

²⁴Proceedings of Town Council of Fort Des Moines, May 5, 1857, p. 4.

expensive gifts back to his parents and relatives in Illinois. A niece who visited him at this time says:

I saw him for the first and last time when he was in the midst of these and other enterprises, in 1857. * * * All around Des Moines at that early day we found prairie grass as high as the horses. Hidden in the grass were delicious wild strawberries and beautiful red lilies. My uncle was enthusiastic over the future of Des Moines, and had many friends among all classes as he deserved to have. He was generous to his friends and kind to the poor. To us children he was the mysterious uncle in the West who sent us beautiful toys, sometimes lovely hats and dresses; also jewelry,—lockets, and necklaces, bracelets, rings and brooches made from nuggets he had brought from the mines of California. He sent to his beautiful young sisters as presents fine riding horses, and to his father many horses. Among others a pair of matched greys that the old gentleman drove in his carriage as long as he lived.

In the spring of 1857 occurred that tragic incident in Iowa history, the Indian massacre at Spirit Lake. Of course all sorts of wild reports spread over the country, and as there were no railroads nor telegraphs in those days, it was impossible to obtain accurate information in regard to what had happened or was about to happen. The report reached Des Moines that the Sioux Indians were marching south with the intention of raiding the new capital. All possible arms were procured and men drilled for defense. A scouting party was made up to try to ascertain the truth of this report. W. A. Scott, Jefferson S. Polk, B. D. Thomas and others made a rapid ride toward Boonesboro, but found no foundation for the rumor, and upon their return the excitement subsided.²⁵

In the latter part of 1857 the shadow of hard times began to darken over the growing city and to affect those who had had a prominent part in its prosperity. The first mention of its touching the Scott family comes in a letter from James L. Scott to his parents, which gives so many interesting items of persons and events that it is worthy of being given almost in its entirety:

De Moin Citty, Iowa, Dec. 20th/57.

Dear Father & Mother,

We avail ourselves of the present Sabbath morning just before starting to meeting to write you a few lines. We are very anxious to hear from you. We have had no word from you for some time. Hews promised to write to us but he has not. We are all well at present and

²⁵Porter's "Annals of Polk County and City of Des Moines," 1898, p. 197.

all our friends as far as I know, and are all doing as well as could be expected. Lucinda I think has a very good man; they have a boy baby.

We have the seat of Government of the state located here and the state officers are all here with all that appertains to their offices and the supreme court is now in session and will probably hold their session until the legislature convenes which will be the second Monday in January. Times are very hard here at this time but we think they will be better toward spring. I would be glad if you would come over and see us next spring. I want you to write to us and let us know how you are getting along. As it is now about time to start to meeting I will postpone further writing until I return.

One o'clock P. M. We have just returned from meeting, Mary Ann, Cemantha and I. We heard a first rate sermon delivered by N. Sumerbell, formerly of Cincinnati, Ohio. It is probable you have read his debate with a Methodist preacher by the name of Flood, on the Trinity and Total Depravity. He is a very smart man, and I think a very good man. He is rather of the old stamp of Christians. We have not joined the church here yet but will as soon as we get our letters from Jefferson county.

I do not know how long we may stay here. I have not sold our farm yet, nor do I expect to soon for times are rather hard to sell land at present. I am well enough satisfied here and I think I can do well enough. You would probably like to know how or what I am doing. I am keeping Eleck's books at present and taking a general oversight of all his business, and I have two mule teams and one horse team that I am running every day at \$3 per day. I will clear with the teams about \$6 per day. * * *

On February 7, 1858, he wrote again:

Eleck is getting along as well as could be expected these hard times. He is keeping boarders during the session of the Legislature. He is keeping from 20 to 25 of the members. The Legislature met the second Tuesday in January and will probably hold until the first of April or probably longer, and then probably adjourn until some time in the fall. They have to codify the laws so as to agree with the new constitution. This is one reason why they hold so long a session. Another reason is that the Republicans have a majority and they are a little hungry. The building that was erected for the Legislature to meet in at this place by Eleck and others, I think the Legislature will take and pay the company for the same.

The hard times of 1857 and 1858 sadly effected Willson Alexander Scott. His generosity in the building of the capitol and in the donating of such a large tract of land for the capitol site had seriously drained his resources. Still a young man, with the spirit of adventure strong within him, he joined an expedi-

tion leaving for Pike's Peak. James L. Scott thus announced the news to his father on May 8, 1859, with other items regarding the hard times:

Eleck expects to start for Pike's Peak this week. The bridge that he built across the Demoin river has fallen down and the most of it washed away. In this he lost about seven thousand dollars.

Times are very hard here this spring, though we still live in hope that times will soon be better. We have had a tolerable backward spring but still the farmers are getting along pretty well. They have generally got their wheat and oats in and there will be a great deal of corn planted this week, and in fact some planted last week. Flour is from \$3.50 to \$4.50 per hundred. Corn is from sixty to seventy cents per bu., oats 50 cts. Oxen worth from sixty to eighty dollars per yoke, &c.

Mr. R. W. Clark, an old friend of W. A. Scott's, in an article published in the *Des Moines Capital* of May 24, 1890, gives an account of their journeying and of the sudden and unexpected illness and death of Mr. Scott:

In the early part of April, 1859, W. A. Scott and myself conceived the idea of going to Pike's Peak together. We decided to take a portable saw mill which we purchased of L. S. Harter. We then bought about twenty yoke of oxen, and several wagons and horse teams.

We loaded the wagons with the mill, fixtures and provisions, estimated to last a dozen men twelve months. We also laid in everything we could think of as being needed, and pulled out from Des Moines about the middle of May.

We had thirteen men with us. We reached Ft. Kearney without adventure worthy of note, but at that place Mr. Scott suddenly took seriously ill. Fearing that his illness would prove fatal, one of the party and myself went to the Fort and made the acquaintance of Surgeon Summers and stated to him who we were, requesting him to come and see our friend. This he did, and after an examination of Scott he said that he thought it was not a serious matter; that loose bowels was quite a common grievance with emigrants traveling along the Platte river; and then added that he always visited the sick once when called upon and recommended the citizen physician, Doctor Rankin, who at our request came at once and prescribed for Scott. After that he attended him daily. He said it was nothing very serious.

We gave Scott a large tent to himself, and one of the men—they taking turns at it—waited day and night beside him; but still he grew worse. The day before his death I was so well convinced that he was sinking, I rode to the Fort and insisted upon the surgeon accompanying the doctor to my friend's bedside. He came, and even then said he thought he would get over it. But all was in vain. Scott died at 2:15

the next morning, June 23, 1859, with all of us around him. At sunset of that day we buried him, placing a board with his name upon it at the head of the grave. Our men only were present at the performance of this last duty to our friend W. A. Scott. No one present but had tears to wipe away,—Hank, a young man who had lived with Scott for years, cried like a child.

Scott owned a large part of what is now East Des Moines. He was a benevolent and whole-souled man, and any one promising to build and get his family under his own roof, could get a lot to build upon at almost his own price, or upon his own terms of Scott. His whole aim and object appeared to be to build up East Des Moines. He was largely interested in providing a house for the legislature and in getting them to this place. In so doing he somewhat embarrassed himself, which was mainly his object in going to Pike's Peak. He hoped to make a fortune there and return and further build up Des Moines.²⁶

It was indeed a calamity that so young and vigorous a man should be taken by the hand of death. The *Iowa State Journal* of July 2, 1859,²⁷ printed the following sincere tribute:

DEATH OF W. A. SCOTT

It is with feelings of deep sorrow that we are forced to announce the death of our fellow-townsmen, W. A. Scott, Esq. He died at Fort Kearney, of cholera morbus. He was attended by the surgeon of the Fort. So sudden is the shock to this community, so sincere the grief, so honest the expression of regret at the loss of this worthy citizen and good man, that we must defer a more lengthy notice to some subsequent day. Mr. Scott was on his way to Pike's Peak.

On July 13 the *Iowa Weekly Citizen* also published an account of his death:

W. A. Scott.—We neglected, last week, to announce the death of our townsman, W. A. Scott. Mr. S. was known to nearly every citizen of Polk county, in whose affairs he has played an active part. He had many warm friends and exerted much influence in this community. He was on his way to Pike's Peak, when Death overtook him, and suddenly ended all his plans for active life and the acquisition of wealth. He died at Kearney City, a few miles west of Fort Kearney, after a week's illness. He had the best medical aid the Fort could provide, and careful nursing. He sleeps his last sleep, far from home and the scenes to which he was so much attached. His remains will be brought here for interment. His family have the warm sympathy of the whole community.

²⁶Clipping in scrapbook preserved by Miss Mae Goodrell, Des Moines; also in *Capital* file in Newspaper Collections, Historical Department.

²⁷*Iowa State Journal* and *Iowa Weekly Citizen*, 1859, in Newspaper Collections of Iowa State Historical Society, Iowa City.

Capital Lodge No. 106, I. O. O. F., of which he was a member, at its meeting in August, 1859, offered the following resolutions of sympathy and esteem:

DEATH OF W. A. SCOTT—PROCEEDINGS OF CAPITAL LODGE,
NO. 106, I. O. O. F.

On the 23d day of June, 1859, when a short distance west of Fort Kearney, our worthy and esteemed brother W. A. Scott, was seized with a violent illness, and suddenly was taken from among the living.

As his brethren who have known him intimately for years, and were acquainted to a great extent with his characteristics of private virtue, charity and truth, and his spirit of public enterprise, evincing a great heart, and gifted intellect, veiled by a modesty of deportment which intruded not itself unseemingly on any occasion or in any place, we take this occasion to put upon record our estimate of his proverbial excellencies. Therefore be it

Resolved, That in the loss of brother Wilson A. Scott, our Lodge feels itself to have sustained a great loss, in common with the entire city of Des Moines, in which our deceased brother was one of the most trustworthy, generous and enterprising.

Resolved, That as a husband he was a model, providing well for his own household, and exemplifying the domestic qualities of faithfulness.

Resolved, That as an Odd Fellow we knew him to be devoted to the cause of Fidelity, covenanted Brotherhood, integrity to every obligation toward brethren, a lively recollection of every obligation, and all crowned with the imperial virtue of truth.

Resolved, That regarding our own loss as great, that of his own family is irreparable.

Resolved, That this Lodge will clothe its Hall in mourning, and that the members shall wear the usual badge of mourning for the space of thirty days.

Resolved, That these proceedings be spread on our minutes in full, and a copy thereof duly forwarded to the widow of our deceased brother.

—*Iowa State Journal*, August 20, 1859.

Capitol Hill, the scene of his greatest labors and greatest successes, was always very dear to Mr. Scott. Standing one day at the summit of the hill, looking across the valley southward and westward, he had expressed a desire to be buried at that place. His friends recollected this wish, and some months after his death had his remains brought back to Des Moines, and on November 1, 1859, they were interred with due honors at the spot he had designated. Invitations to his funeral were printed and sent to his friends.²⁸ The *Iowa State Journal* of November 5 thus fittingly commented on the occasion:

²⁸Original in scrapbook preserved by Miss Mae Goodrell, Des Moines.

BURIED

The remains of W. A. Scott, who died near Fort Kearney some months since, were brought here on Monday last, and on Tuesday they were buried on the point of the hill, east side. It was a fitting place for the burial. From his grave can be seen the town, with its building and its improvements, its scattered outskirts and its central site, and from the grave of him who did as much if not more than others to build up our city, all his public works while here can be seen—an ever enduring monument to the memory of Aleck Scott.

The Odd-Fellows, of which order he was a member, turned out in fair numbers to do honor to the memory of their departed brother.

The *Weekly Citizen* of November 2 had this brief paragraph:

The remains of W. A. Scott were brought to this city on Monday last, from Fort Kearney, and were interred with Masonic honors yesterday. It will be recollected by our readers at a distance, that the deceased, who has been a prominent and enterprising citizen of Des Moines, died on his way to Pike's Peak.

Thus ends the all-too-brief record of the life of one of the most influential of the early citizens of Des Moines. A life probably not altogether free from the faults and failings of the time, but yet an upbuilding influence in the history of his town. Pioneer, farmer, trader, ferryman, traveler, and business man, quick to see and take advantage of possibilities, he crowded into a short life of forty-one years more than most men accomplish in three score years and ten. The beautiful capitol site will ever be a memorial to him. His grave, neglected somewhat in the swiftly passing years, is now marked by a massive granite boulder brought hither on the ice sheet that once invaded our state.²⁹ Upon this soon will be affixed by the Historical Department of Iowa and the Old Settlers Association of Polk County a bronze tablet bearing a suitable inscription, and the multitudes of Iowa citizens who throng our city during each year and visit the capitol grounds will bestow a thought of gratitude on Willson Alexander Scott.

²⁹At different times a movement to mark his grave with a more elaborate monument has been attempted. In the Public Archives Division of the Historical Department is a petition to the General Assembly of 1884, the first session held in the new State House, asking that the state "appropriate a sufficient sum of money to fence and put a suitable monument over the grave of W. A. Scott, the man who so generously donated the square whereon this Capitol stands, and the Governor's Square, as well as the land and greater part of the old capitol to this state." The petition was signed by over seventy early settlers of Polk County, among them being Barlow Granger, P. M. Casady, J. S. Polk, Wesley Redhead, Hoyt Sherman, W. H. McHenry, Thomas Cavanaugh, F. M. Mills, J. Callanan, John M. Davis, and F. M. Hubbell. However, no action was taken.—Editor.

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