

Old Capitol Library: Its History, Contents, and Restoration

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ON JUNE 12, 1838, THE SECOND SESSION of the Twenty-fifth Congress of the United States declared that "from and after the third day of July next," the territory of Wisconsin be divided and the territorial government of Iowa established. The passage of the Organic Act created with one stroke Iowa Territory and its first "constitution."

Luckily for Iowa, the federal legislators valued books highly, for they not only established Iowa's first library, but funded it handsomely. The Organic Act, Section 18, states that:

... the sum of five thousand dollars by and the same is hereby appropriated out of any money in the treasury not otherwise appropriated, to be expended by and under the direction of the governor of the said territory of Iowa, in the purchase of a library to be kept at the seat of government for the accommodation of the governor, legislative assembly, judges, secretary, marshal, and attorney of said territory, and such other persons as the governor and legislative assembly shall direct.¹

The appointed governor of Iowa Territory, Robert Lucas, wasted no time in carrying out this directive. In less than three weeks, he compiled a list of items for the library, and turned it over to Edward Lucas, a Cincinnati bookseller!

On November 12, 1838, in the governor's first annual message, he said:

Previous to leaving Ohio, in June last, (with the assistance of several literary friends,) I made out a catalogue of such standard works as are deemed most important as the foundation of a public library, and put

¹U.S. Statute II, Chapter 96, Sec. 18, *United States Statutes at Large*, 5, 240.

catalogue into the hands of an agent in Cincinnati to make the purchase for me.²

One of Lucas' "literary friends" was Theodore S. Parvin, who would become Iowa's first territorial librarian. Parvin said that in 1839 he bought miscellaneous books in Baltimore, and that McLain* selected law books.³

Several letters in the Robert Lucas papers at the State Historical Society of Iowa shed light on the early selection and acquisition of books. Probably the most important of these is one dated September 6, 1838, from Robert Lucas to Edward Lucas. The governor noted Edward Lucas' suggestions for additions in the fields of law and medicine, and approved them. Robert Lucas then suggested the inclusion of works on Indians, a complete set of elementary school books, theological works of "all denominations of Christians, as well as the Mahomitan Koran," and township plats of all the "surveys lands in this Territory."⁴

It seems that the \$5,000 grant was not totally used for the library, because the letter continues: "Sir, I am perfectly willing to submit to your judgment in filling the catalogue of Books for the Library to the amt. of \$4,000 including your per cent."⁵

Between August and October of 1838, there were four letters between Governor Lucas and E. S. Haines, Surveyor General of Cincinnati. In August, Haines suggested an enlargement of the list of law books. In September, Haines acknowledged receipt of \$4,000 for books. Finally, on October 19, Haines reported that: ". . . your list of books for Mr. Lucas and Co. has been made as perfect as the amount (\$4,000) would purchase."⁶

Suggestions for the library came from George Templeman⁷ and Samuel Williams.⁸ Parvin, who was in Cincinnati, reported

²1838 Iowa Council Journal, 13.

*John McLean of Ohio, 1829-1861, who was to become a Justice of the United States Supreme Court.

³Edward H. Stiles, *Recollections and Sketches of Notable Lawyers and Public Men of Early Iowa* (Des Moines: Homestead Publishing Company, 1916), 570.

⁴Letter from Robert Lucas to Edward Lucas, September 6, 1838, Robert Lucas Papers, State Historical Society of Iowa (hereafter cited as RLP).

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶Letter from E. S. Haines to Robert Lucas, August 14, 1838; Lucas to Haines, September 6, 1838; Haines to Lucas, September 28, 1838; and Haines to Lucas, October 19, 1838, RLP.

⁷Letter from George Templeman to Lucas, September 20, 1838, RLP.

⁸Letter from Samuel Williams to Lucas, November 14, 1838, RLP.

on the first of October that some of the books were boxed and were waiting for the river to rise. He also mentioned that Mr. Lucas "will start East this week and will procure the remainder as soon as possible."⁹

By the end of November, two boxes containing a total of 238 volumes were shipped aboard the steamboat H. S. Kinney. "We expect in a few days to ship you more boxes . . ."¹⁰ On or about the ninth of April, 1839, most of the books arrived in Burlington.¹¹ Delay caused by low waters had extended the transportation time to over four months!

On April 10, Theodore Parvin, private secretary to Governor Lucas, was commissioned as librarian. Parvin immediately devised a simple classification scheme, and arranged the books in alphabetical order in walnut cases.¹² The fruit of his labor was the "Catalogue of the Iowa Territorial Library," printed by James G. Edwards in Burlington in 1839. The Iowa Masonic Library in Cedar Rapids, which was founded by Mr. Parvin, possesses a copy. The catalogue is 4 inches by 6 and 1/8 inches, 18 pages in length, and has a blue cover. On the last page are the words "1568 vols., \$3.80 cash per vol.," possibly in Parvin's handwriting.

There is no doubt that Parvin was a most remarkable man: a collector, curator, lawyer, professor, and public servant. Johnson Brigham, state librarian from 1898 to 1936, even called him the "Nestor of Iowa librarians."¹³

One fine source of information about Parvin is Joseph E. Morcombe's *The Life and Labors of Theodore Sutton Parvin*, published in Clinton, Iowa, in 1906. Another source is Parvin's diaries, which are located in the Iowa Masonic Library. It is ironic to note that Parvin was probably not paid for his efforts. In a lengthy letter (undated) to the Committee on Expenditures of the House of Representatives, Parvin said that he:

entered upon the duties of the office by superintending the fitting up of the Library Room and making out the *Catalogue of the Books* which it

⁹Letter from Theodore Parvin to Lucas, October 1, 1838, RLP.

¹⁰Letter from Edward Lucas and Co. to Robert Lucas, November 20, 1838, RLP.

¹¹Luella Margaret Wright, "Iowa's Oldest Library," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics* (1940), 38, 412.

¹²*Ibid.*, 413.

¹³Johnson Brigham, "Iowa's Pioneer Librarian," *Iowa Library Quarterly* (1901), 1, 55.

contained all of which being done and before the Library was finally opened or the Catalogue published . . .

He concluded with a request for \$400, of which \$100 was for "Services rendered in Superintending Library & as Librarian." He reminded the committee that for all his work he had "*never yet received the first farthing*—"¹⁴

On January 5, 1842, Parvin's petition for compensation was presented to the fourth legislative assembly by Serranus C. Hastings. It was referred to the committee on claims. On February 2, the:

Said committee have had the same under consideration, and are of opinion that the Legislature have no right to authorize the Secretary of the Territory to appropriate any money, now in his hands, to pay said claim, and asked to be discharged from further consideration of the subject. On motion, the committee were discharged . . .¹⁵

The Parvin catalogue may be the only one of this early period, despite the fact that in the *Historical Sketch of the Iowa State Library* (1875), appear these words: "The catalogue of the original collection, prepared by Judge McLean, cannot be found, although one hundred copies were ordered, by the second legislative assembly, to be printed."¹⁶

Brigham disputes the McLean theory in his history of Iowa's first library, published in 1912 and 1913. He definitely credits Parvin with the making of the original catalogue.¹⁷ The Journal of the second legislative assembly refers only twice to the catalogue. On Monday afternoon, November 18, 1839, the standing committee on the library was "instructed to wait on his excellency Gov. Lucas, and respectfully request him to furnish them with a catalogue of the books composing the Territorial Library, together with the original inventory of purchase . . ."¹⁸

Then on the morning of November 21, 1839, Jesse D. Payne of the library committee reported:

That it has been the pleasure of His Excellency Governor Lucas to comply with the same, that a catalogue of Books is herewith submitted for

¹⁴T. S. Parvin, undated letter, Miscellaneous Letters, State Historical Society of Iowa.

¹⁵1841 Iowa Council Journal, 54, 145.

¹⁶Iowa State Library, Des Moines, Report, 1875, 9.

¹⁷Johnson Brigham, "Pioneer History of the Territorial and State Library of Iowa," *Annals of Iowa* (1912), 10, 491.

¹⁸1840 Iowa Council Journal, 31.

the inspection of the Council, and that the original Invoices are in possession of the committee, which his Excellency requests may be returned, as they will be needed in settling with his agent.*¹⁹

Just two weeks before, on November 5, 1839, the governor had delivered his second annual message. Lucas disclosed that the appropriation had been expended, and the books received. He recommended a law regarding the appointment of the librarian and defining the librarian's duties. He also suggested a small annual appropriation for periodicals and other books.

Parvin's name was never mentioned. Lucas referred to Iowa's second territorial librarian, Charles Weston, as being appointed "pro tem" on October 18, 1839. Lucas continued:

There being no provision made by law for paying the rent of the library room, and other incidental expenses connected therewith, Mr. John S. David, the proprietor of the building, agreed to fit up the room, and wait the pleasure of the Legislature to make him such an allowance as they might deem reasonable.²⁰

Now, Charles Weston, a lawyer from New York, who had come to Burlington in 1837, temporarily took over the reins. He held the post from October 18, 1839, until January 24, 1840. On this date, Morgan Reno became the third and last territorial librarian. Reno was in the banking business, and was also second treasurer of the territory and the first state treasurer. Under Reno's leadership, the library was moved to Iowa City in 1841. In his second annual report, he said:

I am happy to inform you, that the Territorial Library is now arranged and in good order in this city. By care and attention in packing, the books have arrived here uninjured.²¹

And Reno compiled the library's second catalogue. This was printed by A. P. Wood in Iowa City in 1845. A copy may be found in the Iowa Masonic Library. It is 18 pages in length, and is just slightly smaller than the 4 by 6 and 1/8 inch 1839 catalogue. Comparing the two catalogues, we find fewer titles in the 1845 edition. The Laws of Iowa are listed in the 1839 catalogue, but

*Although these two references raise the third possibility that Robert Lucas himself prepared a catalogue, it seems more likely that the governor handed over Parvin's list to the committee.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 36.

²⁰1839 Iowa Council Journal, 194.

²¹Iowa Territorial Library, Iowa City, Report, 1841; Iowa State Department of History and Archives; 4th Terr. Assembly, 1841, Six 23.

not the 1845. The works of Thomas Moore are gone. Charles Bucke's *On the Beauties, Harmonies, and Sublimities of Nature* . . . is missing. James Hervey's *Meditations* has disappeared along with five maps and eight medical books. Were the legislators amateur doctors?

In 1846, the year following the publication of the library's second catalogue, Iowa became a state. Four librarians were to serve as state librarian while the state library was housed at Old Capitol in Iowa City. In 1846, Lemuel B. Patterson was appointed; in 1851, Israel Kister; in 1852, Martin L. Morris, and in 1855, John Pattee.

What was the atmosphere like in the Old Capitol Library? Johnson Brigham called it "the day of candles and goose quills,"²² describing the use of tallow candles, wafers and sealing-wax, and pepper-boxes of sand to absorb ink.

In 1847, the librarian was paid a salary of \$150 annually. An act passed in 1840 setting the salary at \$210 was repealed at this time. The librarian did have "authority to appoint an assistant . . . provided, however, that said assistant shall be paid out of the salary of the librarian."²³

According to Ada North, state librarian from 1871 to 1878, at the salary of \$150, little care was given to the library. She recounts a legend that "for several years the sole guardian of the library was the key to the door of the room containing it, which was generally left, hanging conveniently near, for the unrestricted use of any person desiring access to the books."²⁴

We know there was some excitement in the library. In the 1840s, after editor Jesse Williams criticized legislator George H. Walworth, a fight ensued in the library. "Being a powerful man, Walworth soon had his opponent upon the floor where he proceeded to give him so thorough a beating that blood flowed freely and began to form a pool on the carpet." Secretary of the Territory O. H. W. Stull, who had purchased it, asked them why they were spoiling his carpet, and ejected the "scoundrels."²⁵

²²Johnson Brigham, "Pioneer History . . .," 506-508.

²³Laws of Iowa, Chapter 48, Secs. 12, 16 and 20, Iowa General Assembly, *Acts and Resolutions*, 1847 (1913 reprint), p. 59.

²⁴Iowa State Library, 1875 Report, p. 13.

²⁵John C. Parish, "Perils of a Pioneer Editor," *Palimpsest* (1921), 2, 237.

In the following decade, to prevent a different kind of excitement, the legislature passed a law declaring that the library room could be used only for library purposes. In the margin of the law book appear the words: "Library not to be used for balls."²⁶

This same law had two other very important sections. The librarian was to prepare a catalogue before April 1, 1856,* and the books were to be labeled with a printed label with the words "Iowa State Library," the number of the volume in the catalogue inscribed on that label, and the words "Iowa State Library" written on the bottom of the thirtieth page of each volume.²⁷

It was in 1855 that the law requiring identification on the library books was passed. Only two years later, Des Moines became the capital of the state.

In the fall of 1857 the library was brought from Iowa City, in charge of Mr. John Pattee, Auditor of State, who was also librarian. The 3,000 volumes which the library then contained, were deposited in a room prepared for that purpose in the capitol, and shortly after Mr. L. I. Coulter was made librarian.²⁸

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, Parvin wrote to state librarian Brigham and compared the 1872 catalogue with the earlier two. He noted that the comparison:

Reveals some facts not so pleasant or creditable to your early predecessors or to the territory and state. Many of the volumes found in the catalogue of 1839 are not catalogued in that of 1845 or 1872, showing that there were some book-thieves in those days as well as in later years.²⁹

The Library's Contents and Authors

Theodore Parvin divided the contents of the library into fifteen broad subjects. The classifications were: *Biography, Education, History, Jurisprudence, Laws, Reports, Medicine, Miscellaneous, Periodical, Poetry, Political, Etc., Science, Etc., Theological, Voyages and Travels, and Maps.*

"Etc." becomes meaningful when you consider that "Science, Etc." contained George Campbell's *Philosophy of Rhetoric*, John Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding*, and books on philoso-

²⁶Laws of Iowa, Chapter 157, Sec. 19, Iowa General Assembly, *Acts, Resolutions and Memorials* (1853-55), 4-5, 235.

*This apparently was not done, because the next catalogue that can be found is the first catalogue of the state library, published in 1872.

²⁷*Ibid.* Chapter 157, Secs. 10 and 11, 233.

²⁸Iowa State Library, Des Moines, Report, 1885, 13.

²⁹Johnson Brigham, "Iowa's Pioneer Librarian," 56.

phy and phrenology. Included was the first American work on mineralogy, Parker Cleaveland's *An Elementary Treatise on Mineralogy and Geology*. Also grouped in this section were books on architecture, botany, topographical drawing, chemistry, and mathematics.

The Biography class boasted the beautiful four volume set of the *National Portrait Gallery of Distinguished Americans*, published in the years 1834-1839. Along with the portrait engravings, from which many best-known likenesses are derived, are short biographies.

In separate books were the stories of such Americans as Thomas Jefferson, Robert Fulton, Joshua Barney, Aaron Burr, John Paul Jones, Nathanael Greene, Gouverneur Morris, Joseph Story, and Patrick Henry. Other volumes included biographies of Samuel Johnson, Christopher Columbus, Napoleon I, Louis XIV, Benvenuto Cellini, and *The Life of Christ* by August Neander.

Various views on education were in the library: "popular," "liberal," "practical," "female," "progressive," "home," and "systematic." The "Lancasterian" theory* is represented twice, once with a manual of its teaching system by the English founder, Joseph Lancaster, and with an address by John Griscom entitled *Monitorial Instruction*.

The collection was strong in history and poetry. These subjects must have seemed compelling and vital and satisfying to the needs of the nineteenth century reader in his small world. They provided intellectual and emotional stimulation which would be hard to match today when we are surrounded by visual entertainment and rapid and continual technological change.

There were histories of the United States, and of the states of Ohio, Louisiana, Pennsylvania, New Hampshire, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Kentucky, North Carolina, New York, Vermont, and Maine. There were histories of England (ten!), France, Rome, Greece, Mexico, Peru, India, and Scotland. Even a university made the list: there was a history of Harvard. By 1852, 59 titles (168 actual volumes) had been accumulated.

There were 52 poetry titles. One title alone, *British Poets*, con-

*Lancasterian schools had small classes under "monitors," and discipline was quasi-military.

sisted of 50 volumes. It would be difficult to give an accurate count of the total volumes, because it may be that some titles were counted twice. Many titles listed separately appeared to be part of the *British Poets* set.

The poetry was basically pre-1839, and basically British. However, in 1852, Goethe and Longfellow's works were added to the collection. There were one or two volumes of Shakespeare. A reference to "Shakespeare, Johnson" in the 1839 catalogue could mean the work of William Shakespeare, edited by Samuel Johnson.

Parvin took treatises, codes, digests, and dictionaries of law, and classified them "Jurisprudence." Seventy-two titles (139 volumes), approximately two-thirds of which are pre-1839, and the others post-1852, represent the works of Joseph Angell, Matthew Bacon, Joseph Chitty, Jean Domat, Simon Greenleaf, Edward Livingston, Samuel von Pufendorf, William Rawle, Joseph Story, Sir Thomas Edlyne Tomlins, Emmerich de Vattel, and others. The first important book on medical jurisprudence published in the United States, *Elements of Medical Jurisprudence*, by Theodor Beck, was a part of this group.

There were laws of the United States and thirteen individual states. There were court reports of Great Britain, the United States, and eleven states. It is not surprising that the earlier-established eastern states of New York and Pennsylvania had by far the greatest number of reports.

One really could have been an amateur doctor if you consider the titles contained in "Medicine." There were studies on the nerves, heart, blood, and ear. There were textbooks on the practice of medicine, the treatment of particular diseases, and even a dictionary of "practical" surgery. By 1845, all three books by William Dewees had disappeared. These were on midwifery, the diseases of females, and "Dewees on practice"—which could be either his treatise on the treatment of children or *A Practice of Physic*.

For those interested in the mind, the library contained Isaac Ray's *Medical Jurisprudence of Insanity*, and Benjamin Rush's *Medical Inquiries and Observations upon the Diseases of the Mind*. The latter book, published in 1812, was one of the earliest volumes of modern psychiatry.

If you were still interested in this particular subject, you might

check "Miscellaneous," for this is where Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* was placed. Burton, in order to "avoid melancholy,"³⁰ wrote the book in the early seventeenth century. The Old Capitol Library apparently had a two volume edition published in Philadelphia in 1836.

Also in "Miscellaneous," we find *Parent's Friend*, *The Academician*, *Chrestomathia* (all on education); John Armstrong's *Treatise on Agriculture*, speeches, statistical works, dictionaries including Noah Webster's first edition (1828), and collected works of Francis Bacon, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Samuel Johnson, Sir Walter Scott, Daniel Webster, and others.

Looking further, you might be intrigued by Daniel Browne's *The Trees of America*, or the most famous comic novel ever written, *Don Quixote*. Or, maybe Giovanni Marana's eight volume *Letters of a Turkish Spy* would be for you.

The periodical section reflected the temper of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: the flowery language, the reviews that attack the character of the author (or philosophize on an entirely different subject) rather than criticize the book, and the contemporary view of many of the same books contained in the Old Capitol Library.

You find a picture of the society which is a revelation because it shows its attitudes and biases as well as its history. Some periodicals were: *American Almanac and Repository of Useful Knowledge*, *American Quarterly Review*, *Edinburgh Review*, *Foreign Quarterly Review*, *Knickerbocker*, *Methodist Magazine*, *Niles' Register*, *North American Review*, and *Silliman's Journal of Science*.

The 34 titles in "Political, Etc." included John Adam's *A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America*; *American state papers*; the fifth United States census (1830); *American Archives*; papers of James Madison; Thomas Malthus' essay on population; documents, journals, speeches, and correspondence relating to early American history; and the classic observation of American society, *Democracy in America*, by Alexis de Tocqueville.

We are reminded of another time when anonymous authors sent letter after letter to newspapers. The political and philoso-

³⁰*Dictionary of National Biography*, 3, 465.

Mrs. Ries sold "all her things" to an antique dealer "six or seven years ago." Mr. Graf purchased several dozen of these books from the dealer. These were remembered to be state and government reports, and were marked in pencil "Old Capitol" or "Iowa State Library" on preliminary leaf or title page. Some were in bad shape and were thrown away; others Mr. Graf sold.³⁹

On July 23 and 24, the lists of "found" books were delivered to the seven libraries. An accompanying letter requested that the libraries participate in Iowa's "appointment with history" with the donation of these books to the Old Capitol Restoration. On the 24th, The University of Iowa Main Library agreed to share in our project, and this was a red-letter day!

In August, our missing list was circulated to ninety-two libraries and institutions in Iowa, plus the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. It was also sent to a few individuals who had expressed an interest.

On September 18, 1973, the State Historical Society of Iowa transferred their five books, and these were the first actually catalogued and received into the restored collection.

When trying to look back, and credit persons who were central in forming the character and fostering the development of Iowa's first library, one must mention the following: Robert Lucas for selection; Theodore Parvin for selection, organization, and the first catalogue; Morgan Reno for bringing it to Iowa City and for the second catalogue; Governor Stephen Hempstead for the purchase of over 250 volumes of miscellaneous books (including a 33 volume set of James Fenimore Cooper's works for \$24.00!);⁴⁰ Librarian Martin Morris for the purchase of \$500 worth of law books; and Governor James Grimes for the purchase of 101 law books and 303 miscellaneous books.

As far as capturing its history for the rest of us, one must mention Ada North, who contributed an historical sketch in 1875, and Johnson Brigham whose "Pioneer History of the Territorial

was a Ries bookstore. In 1952, Ries was listed, but the store was not in the 1954 directory.

³⁹Conversation with William Graf, June 28, 1973.

⁴⁰Governor Hempstead spent \$486.52 on the books. They are listed, along with some sizes and physical descriptions, on pages 310-311 of the 1853 Iowa Senate Journal.

and State Library of Iowa" (published in *Annals of Iowa* in 1912 and 1913 and later reprinted as *A Library in the Making*) brought together library legislation, the reprint of the first catalogue, and various reports, some of them never before published.

The federal government not only granted \$5,000 for the library in 1838—in 1839, it gave the land on which Old Capitol stands.⁴¹ In 1973, the Iowa American Revolution Bicentennial Commission awarded a \$5,000 grant for the Old Capitol Library's restoration.⁴²

Now the books will be collected, restored, and organized for use according to Theodore Parvin's classification. With the facilities of The University of Iowa, its fine libraries, and the support of the Old Capitol Restoration Committee and the Director of Research for the Old Capitol Restoration, Margaret N. Keyes, the library project continues on schedule.

On July 4, 1976, the restored Old Capitol will be open to the public in celebration of the bicentennial anniversary of our country's founding. The books, returned to the library where they were kept and used by citizens of a century ago, will be part of the recreation of one aspect of Iowa's history.

⁴¹U.S. Statute III, Chapter 77, *United States Statutes at Large*, 5, 330.

⁴²*Iowa City Press Citizen*, June 23, 1973, 9A.

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