

Davenport House*

By SHIRLEY MESCHER

There are many houses like Davenport's "Clifton." They are old and picturesque, regarded by children as "haunted houses" and by grown-ups as imaginative settings for early pioneer history. If houses may be said to have character, they are such, having existed through the rise of cities and the collapse of fortunes.

These homes may not be exactly as they were in the steamboat and parasol days, but the rustle of silk and toot of whistles still whirr in a comfortable, ghostly fashion around their ornate colonnades and mahogany staircases. No matter how modernistic the present furnishings, the 12-foot ceilings, coal burning fireplaces, and crystal chandeliers bespeak another age and other men's stories.

Such a house is "Clifton," known today as the Davenport House. The 100-year-old colonial mansion, which was the first of its kind in the early history of Davenport, was built on a wooded bluff high above the Mississippi by J. M. D. Burrows, who is referred to in the city's annals as Davenport's first merchant prince.

"Clifton's" story is the story of J. M. D. Burrows.

Mr. Burrows was a pioneer businessman whose efforts, success, and even failures contributed immeasurably to the establishment of Davenport as one of the chief market points and industrial centers in the Mississippi Valley. Mr. Burrows came to pioneer Davenport in 1838, when the little river village had a population of about 150, with 15 houses, and had been for

* Miss Mescher based this narrative on interviews with Mrs. Wilma Brown, Waldo Winter, Parke Burrows, and on notes from *Fifty Years of Iowa* by J. M. D. Burrows, and the latter's obituary in *Davenport Times*, April 11, 1889—a colorful bit of history, pointing out the significance of this structure in its contribution to both pioneer and modern Davenport.—Editor.

only six years an actual part of United States property through the Black Hawk purchase.

In the years that followed, his grocery store on Frist (Front) Street between Brady and Ripley expanded into an embryo department store. He established the first packing plant in the city which developed into the largest west of St. Louis. In 1847, he began manufacturing flour under the commercial name "Albion Mills." In 1852-53, two million 18-inch bricks went into the construction of a new building on the levee to house the Burrows and Prettyman store, a new mill, and his home, "Clifton." By 1856 John McDowell Burrows was the wealthiest man in Davenport.

But in the financial panic of the year that followed, he lost every material thing he owned. "Clifton" went with the store, the packing plant, and the flour mill.

Mr. Burrows tells in simple language the story of the loss in his book *Fifty Years of Iowa*:

About this time, Ebenezer Cook came to me and said they were very much in need of money; that he would endorse my note for 20 thousand. Le Claire had promised to do so if I would give him a mortgage on my beautiful home, "Clifton."

I said: "I cannot do that, Mr. Cook; that is my *home*."

Cook repeated his visits, however, and "Clifton" was sold. Mr. Burrows makes no further reference to the house in his book. He was never able to regain it, and died in 1889, after continuing in his milling business, unabashed by two subsequent burnings of the mill. The obituary, in accordance with the times, referred to the personal qualities of the man, and mention of "Clifton" indicates the prominence of the house in Burrow's life and that of Davenport history:

John McDowell Burrows is dead. A man of big heart, of honest impulses, of deathless energy,—one who for 50 years has been actively and thoroughly identified with Davenport, is no more. . . . He was good—a cheerful man, the best of husbands, tenderest of fathers—who loved his neighbor as himself, whose charities at times outlived his means, whose public spirit and benevolence was like the breath he drew. . . .

Beneath the bluff he built a snug cottage; beneath the

eminence upon which he built the finest mansion in the country "Clifton," where he hoped to spend long useful years. . . .

After the house passed out of Mr. Burrows hands, it was bought by George L. Davenport, and remained in the Davenport family for twenty-five years.

For another twenty-five, it was vacant, virtually a forgotten monument with weeds reaching up at least five feet beyond the bases of the two-story porch columns, the Ionic capitals of which Mr. Burrows had carved himself.

In those days, John Winter was just another small boy who raided the apple orchard which sloped downhill in front of the old house. But whenever the gang made a trip to the orchard, John spent more time admiring the deserted house than helping with the "harvest." The picture of "Clifton" which he carried away with him was an enduring one and in 1907, John Winter bought the house.

Today, "Clifton" still retains the beauty—and perhaps additional beauty by virtue of its age—which it possessed when the *Democrat* referred to it as "the finest mansion in the country." The original structure has been altered mainly in the addition of two second story wings. The house was originally shaped like a three-tier cake, the top tier being the tower room, a 20' by 20' room walled on four sides with windows. Legend has it that the tower room was used as an observation point in watching for escaped slaves making their way to Canada via barge during the days of the underground railroad.

But the floor length windows, carrara marble fireplaces—originally thirteen, now nine,—crystal chandeliers, heavy woodwork, mahogany staircase, and two-story porch columns still retain the dignity and majesty of the original house. The size of the estate when "Clifton" was first built included twenty acres of Davenport's present residential district, from Telegraph Road to Twelfth Street. The property now covers a little over an acre.

Flanked by homes of more modern design, "Clifton"

still remains one of the show places of Davenport. It has been used as a setting for Octave Thanet's novel *The Man of the Hour*, and a sketch of the house is drawn on the wall of the *Times* cafeteria in downtown Davenport. Most important, however, "Clifton" is once again a home—this time of four families.

Can a historical landmark still fulfill the requirements of a comfortable home? The answer to that question can only be obtained from those who live there. The answer would seem to be "yes."

The old Burrows mansion is now under the care of John Winter's wife, son, and daughter, and has been converted into apartments, two on each story. Mrs. John Winter, Mrs. Wilma Brown (Wilma Winter), and the latter's ten-year-old son, Davey, live in one of the downstairs apartments. Mr. and Mrs. Waldo Winter live upstairs. The other two apartments are also rented out.

Does living in the old house acquire the feeling of living in a museum? Not to them. Yes, it is an unusual house. The Winters keep a scrap book of its history and are constantly on the look out for more information about the past of "Clifton," but life in the big house at 1533 Clay street is perfectly natural.

Children Davey's age, passing his home, refer to it as the "haunted house," but Davey just laughs and parks his bicycle against one of the huge columns on the cement veranda. From there stretches a full view of the Mississippi river as it enters Davenport between wooded hills and continues through the city, most of which J. M. D. Burrows never knew, but which he helped to give existence and prominence.

Would he have approved the present state of "Clifton?" Almost assuredly, he would have. Clifton House, like the man who planned it, is still one of Davenport's "firsts." We can be sure that he wanted them both—the city and the house—to thrive.

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