

Theodore S. Parvin,

THEODORE SUTTON PARVIN,

Private Secretary to Gov. Robert Lucas, 1838-40; First Territorial Librarian, 1839; founder of the Masonic Library and Museum, at Cedar Rapids, Iowa; distinguished as an educator, statesman, and historical collector.

THEODORE S. PARVIN.

BY CHARLES ALDRICH.

This notice of the life and public services of Hon. Theodore S. Parvin has been to some extent extracted from one which the writer published several years ago.

Of all the enterprising young men who came to Iowa in territorial days, few, if any, have left so permanent an impress upon our history as the subject of this article. He had graduated from Cincinnati and Woodward Colleges and completed his legal studies. At an opportune moment (early in 1838) he met Gen. Robert Lucas, who had retired from the governorship of Ohio, receiving from President Martin Van Buren the appointment of first Governor of the new Territory of Iowa. Governor Lucas was at once most favorably impressed with the young man, whom he invited to accompany him to Iowa as his private secretary. An Iowa newspaper of that day paid a high compliment to "two cultured and accomplished young men who came with the Governor." I only know that one of these gifted young men was Theodore S. Parvin—the name of the other I am unable to state. A Governor's private secretary should be as good a man as the Governor himself—his equal in mental culture and capacity for intellectual labor. Such a helper Mr. Parvin proved himself to be. This was the commencement of an active friendship which only ended with the death of the Governor, at Iowa City, in 1853. How useful young Parvin became to the Governor and how implicitly he was trusted we shall see further on.

Theodore Sutton Parvin was born in Cedarville, Cumberland county, New Jersey, on the 15th day of January, 1817, and had therefore entered upon his 85th year. His death occurred at Cedar Rapids, Iowa, on the 28th day of June, 1901. Of his boyhood and youth I am unable to speak, though we may confidently believe that his early life was characterized by sobriety, industry, and thorough devotion

to the studies which fitted him so admirably for his future career of usefulness and honor. He and Gov. Lucas settled in the future city of Burlington, then a small village. In August of that year he appeared before the Hon. Thomas S. Wilson, of Dubuque, then an associate judge of the supreme court of the Territory, as an applicant for admission to practice at the bar. An interesting anecdote concerning that event has been narrated to the writer. I am not certain, however, but it may have been published heretofore; at all events, it is worth repeating. Judge Wilson was at that time only 22 or 23 years of age—quite a juvenile piece of timber from which to construct a justice of the supreme court. But he acquitted himself with such ability and dignity that he remained in the judiciary a long time afterwards. Upon his arrival in the little village of Dubuque, Mr. Parvin repaired at once to the residence of Judge Wilson. Upon knocking at the door it was opened by a very young man, a mere boy in appearance. After the first greeting he asked: "Is your father at home?" "He is not here," was the reply, "but what do you wish?" "Why, I came to see Judge Wilson." "Well, sir, I am Judge Wilson. What can I do for you?" Quickly recovering from his surprise, he said: "I came to apply for admission to the practice of the law." He was at once cordially invited to come in. I can give none of the particulars of the examination, but when he left the house he carried with him a certificate of admission "to practice in all courts of record in the territory aforesaid." This certificate was written out and signed by "T. S. Wilson, one of the associate judges of the supreme court in and for the territory of Iowa." There were no printed blanks for that purpose in those days. This was the first admission of an attorney in the territory, and the original certificate several years ago found a permanent lodgment in The Aldrich Collection of autograph letters, manuscripts and portraits now in the State Historical Building.

During this same year Gov. Lucas, whose Andrew Jack-

son face used to appear on the bills of the old State Bank of Iowa, appointed Mr. Parvin Territorial Librarian. About this time he sent him east to purchase books for the foundation of the Territorial library—the basis of the present State library—to the amount of \$5,000. On his return Gov. Lucas receipted to him for the books, and the receipt, with Mr. Parvin's commission as librarian, are also in the Collection above mentioned.

Right here it may be well to repeat what I have written elsewhere and more than once: Mr. Parvin should have been kept in the position of Territorial and State Librarian from that time forward during his active life, for he has had few equals in the Middle West as a collector of literary wares, books, antiquities, materials for history, etc., etc. Wisconsin had such a worker—Lyman C. Draper, who retained his position until 1887, when he was forced to retire by reason of the infirmities of age. Draper was just such an active, energetic, earnest collector, and the consequence is, that Wisconsin possesses collections surpassing all others in the West, and scarcely paralleled in the Union. Mr. Parvin was not retained, and our State drifted into the senseless policy of appointing librarians—with few exceptions—for political reasons and for short terms. As a natural consequence the libraries of both states have been most conspicuous—one for its extent and value, and the other for its moderate proportions aside from the department of law. I have always believed that had Mr. Parvin been retained in that office, Iowa would have been fully abreast of Wisconsin. The State would now possess invaluable collections, and best of all, they would have cost the State comparatively little beyond the expense of housing and taking care of them. In making such collections the great point of difficulty is in getting the proper quarters for their arrangement and display. Gifts naturally flow into libraries and museums as if by gravitation—if the collector is wide awake and alert, like Parvin and Draper. Had Mr. Parvin been retained the great collection would

long ago have become precious beyond any estimate. It is strange that the men who made our laws failed to realize and comprehend facts so simple and palpable.

The next position to which Mr. Parvin was appointed was that of district attorney for the middle district of Iowa, in the year 1839. In 1840 he was elected secretary of the territorial council. From 1847 to 1857 he was clerk of the United States district court. In 1840-50 he was county judge. This was a position in those days of much power and responsibility, as these so-called judges not only exercised all the duties of surrogates or probate judges, but also (with more of real power) discharged most of the functions now exercised by the boards of county supervisors. They could lay out roads, build bridges or court houses, and run their counties into almost any depth of indebtedness. Some north-western counties were more than twenty years paying the debts incurred in the reign of the county judges. The eastern counties happily had little or no difficulty in that direction. Mr. Parvin's administration was both clean and successful. He was for one term register of the state land office, 1857-8. From 1860 to 1870 he was professor of the natural sciences in the Iowa State University, acting also as secretary of the Iowa Historical Society during the years 1864, '5 and '6. He was one of the founders of THE ANNALS OF IOWA which he edited many years. He was a valued contributor to its pages from the beginning. Those old volumes have become so precious that librarians and historical students are now asking for their republication.

Doubtless the most important service rendered by Mr. Parvin to the State of Iowa—far-reaching in its consequences—was his aid in defeating the constitution of 1844. The constitutional convention of that year named the Missouri river as the western boundary of the proposed State, but congress curtailed these fair dimensions by cutting off from north to south about one-third of the proposed area bordering on the Missouri river and sent the constitution back to be ratified

Robert Lucas,

GOVERNOR OF THE TERRITORY OF IOWA.

TO ALL TO WHOM THESE PRESENTS MAY COME—GREETING:

Know Ye, That reposing special trust and confidence in the integrity and ability of *T. S. Parvin,*

I have nominated, and by ~~and with the advice and consent of the Legislative Council~~ appointed him
Librarian, of the Territory aforesaid—

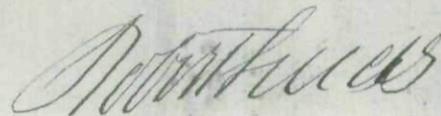
And I do hereby authorize and empower him to execute and fulfil the duties of that office according to law: **TO HAVE AND TO HOLD** the said office, with all the rights, privileges, and emoluments thereunto belonging, *until the end of the next session of the Legislature.*

unless the Governor of the said Territory, for the time being, should think proper sooner to revoke and determine this Commission.

IN TESTIMONY WHEREOF, I have caused these Letters to be made Patent, and the Great Seal of the Territory to be hereunto affixed.

GIVEN UNDER MY HAND, at Burlington, *Tenth* day of
April in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and thirty-nine,
and of the Independence of the United States of America, the 63d.

BY THE GOVERNOR.



by a vote of the people. The late Lieutenant-Governor Enoch W. Eastman, Major Frederick D. Mills,* and T. S. Parvin, vigorously stumped the territory in opposition to the adoption of this constitution, and at each of two elections the following year it was rejected. If the reader will take any map of Iowa and rule off one-third of its territory from north to south on the western side, he will readily see and appreciate what the State would have been deprived of by the adoption of that constitution. It required stalwart courage on the part of these eloquent young men to oppose what it is no injustice to call an iniquity—for the adoption of that constitution was demanded by the leading political influences of the territory, sustained and supported by the administration at Washington. There were United States senatorships to be filled, and other choice plums to be distributed, and men who were looking for promotion were in a hurry to see the territory blossom into a State! The credit of preventing the adoption of the constitution of 1844 is due to Theodore S. Parvin and his two associates on the stump.

Since the introduction of Freemasonry into Iowa in 1840, Judge Parvin has been its foremost representative. He served as grand master in 1852. For some time before that year he had been grand secretary. At the end of his grand mastership he was again chosen grand secretary, a position he held until his death. Through his timely and persistent efforts the headquarters of the fraternity were established at Cedar Rapids in 1885. A fund of some \$20,000 had been accumulated and this was wisely devoted to the erection of a large fire-proof grand lodge museum and library building. For many years, probably as far back as 1840, he had been a collector of the publications of various secret orders, especially those relating to Masonry. These, with rare generosity, he presented to the grand lodge of Iowa, continuing his collections with a zeal which knew no abatement and only

*Major Frederick D. Mills commanded a battalion in the war with Mexico and was killed at the battle of Churubusco, August 20, 1847.

ceased with his life. That library now contains more Masonic books than any other in the world, aside from those relating to all other secret orders. But it is by no means narrowed down to these specialties. It contains many early books and documents relating to Iowa, with considerable collections in history and general literature, making up a library at once varied and comprehensive, aside from its leading feature. There is also a large collection of miscellaneous books published in this State. The new and commodious edifice gave Mr. Parvin ample room and scope to indulge his born proclivity for collecting. It would be a difficult task to attempt to set forth the contents of the building. The museum has grown so rapidly that more space is necessary for the adequate display of the constantly accumulating materials. These include geological and natural history specimens, prehistoric stone implements, arms, coins, autograph letters, manuscripts, works of art, and hundreds of objects which may be set down as curios or bric-a-brac. One new and very interesting item had just been received at the time of one of my visits. It was an especially fine collection of stalactites and stalagmites from the Dubuque mineral caves, sufficient to fill a large case. These were searched for and brought out of the underground darkness by Mr. N. R. Parvin, the son, and for many years a most worthy and efficient coadjutor of the grand secretary. These formations were known to be very beautiful and most desirable additions to the museum, and there seemed no other way to get them than by personal effort. The best thought connected with these interesting objects is that they grew into forms of beauty beneath our own soil. Such is the spirit with which the Parvins have always labored in building up their Masonic Museum and Library, which years ago became one of the most remarkable enterprises in our State.

Mr. Parvin, as I have sufficiently set forth, was a most intelligent as well as an omnivorous and almost universal collector. A great many of these collectors are a stingy sort of

folk. That would seem to be the most natural thing in the world, for a collector, like Oliver Twist, is "always wanting more." Things must be kept or there can be no collection. Mr. Parvin, although so earnest and devoted a collector himself, was always liberal and helpful to other Iowans in the same work. I have personally known him to hand over rare and cherished objects to a brother collector, who seemed to be looking upon them with longing eyes. He was anxious that other state collections should be kept growing. Neither selfishness nor envy entered into his mental constitution.

To the library of the Davenport Academy of Sciences, the library of the State University, the State Library, the State Historical Society, the State Historical Department and The Aldrich Collection, he has been an open-handed, liberal contributor—and to all but the two last named, for a longer period than the life-time of a generation. To the first he has given large collections of scientific books, and many specimens of great interest to the students of natural history, ethnology and archaeology; and the library of the State Historical Society at Iowa City owes to him a large portion of its most precious contents. His gift of early Iowa documents is valuable beyond estimate—for it is now quite impossible to duplicate it. And to these he added bound files of early and later Iowa newspapers, and a large case filled with geological specimens, prehistoric stone implements, with many out-of-the-way objects and curios of greater or less value.

His gifts to the Iowa State Library of early statute laws and public documents were valuable beyond estimate. Printed at first in small editions, they had gone entirely out of print and could be had nowhere else. This rare generosity entitles him to the lasting gratitude of every intelligent Iowan, for without these precious documents, many important points of our history would forever remain undetermined.

His memory will be perpetuated in all the directions named. The memories of men stand little chance of preservation unless they are embalmed in printed books which are

gathered into public libraries. If memories are not so perpetuated they speedily perish. Of the Iowa men who filled the public eye twenty-five years ago, how few are remembered today! They have come and gone like the ephemeras of a soft night in June! But in the libraries I have named the reader in distant future years, will find multiplied and most precious gifts from the free and ever-generous hand of Theodore S. Parvin. They will also preserve the names and records of other men, and not at all unlikely, of many who looked upon his own work with coldness and distrust, doing their best to thwart or embarrass him in his earnest and patriotic efforts. No other Iowa man has built for himself so many, or such permanent and abiding monuments; and if, as Daniel Webster said, speaking of himself, "the mould shall gather upon his memory," there will be plenty of students of Iowa history, who will scrape the moss from the inscriptions.

All honor, then, to the memory of him, the pioneer in this patriotic work—the preservation of the materials of early and later Iowa history. His will be one of the few names of Iowa men which will be imperishable.

* * *

My personal acquaintance with Mr. Parvin was but slight—though I had known him well since 1857 by reputation, and had met him occasionally at the capitol of the State—up to the organization of the Pioneer Law Makers' Association in 1886. From that time forward our relations grew into a cordial and friendly intimacy. He soon learned what I had in view in relation to founding and building up an Iowa Historical Department and Museum, and no man or enterprise ever had a more truly devoted friend than he became to me and my effort. He had long been recognized as the pioneer collector and museum builder in our State—anxious to extend his own work—but he gave me every possible aid and encouragement. His generosity lay not altogether in words, but he made the Department generous gifts and pointed the way to secure others. He many years ago secured

Burlington Iowa,
July 2d. 1839 -

I hereby certify, that, Books
and Maps purchased under
the direction of T. S. Parvin for
the Territorial Library amount
ing, including purchase money
and expenses to \$ 5,031.57
was received from him &
placed in the Library of the
Territory

ROBERT LUCAS
Governor
of the Territory of Iowa

a fine oil portrait of himself by George H. Yewell, N. A. That had been hanging in the State Library, but he recently expressed a strong preference that it should be placed permanently in the Historical Art Room under my charge. I could always ask, and always received, his hearty cooperation and judicious advice. He was as generous as he was uniformly just. If an article reached his collection which the general judgment would say should belong to the Historical Department of the State, he was ready to turn it over at once. Ours was an instance where two of a trade agreed.

At one period, about the years 1891-3, he and his work had many enemies in the Masonic order, and at one of the elections his majority for grand secretary was but a single vote. This was due to two causes—1st, a feud in the order arising out of some question of rites or discipline, not known to the outside world; and 2d, from opposition to the founding and development of the Masonic Library and Museum. The Library and Museum at that time passed through the most critical period of their existence. Many doubted the utility of such a work—having no appreciation of its necessity or uses. Some openly favored largely using the yearly accumulating funds in banqueting and junketing. In this respect the Masonic fraternity did not vary from many other secret or public organizations extant then and afterwards. This social work, the ambition to have “a good time,” absorbs many great energies and prevents more than one association from achieving any high and permanent purpose. I would not decry the social feature, but why not also have in view the accomplishment of permanent purposes, looking to noble and patriotic ends? That idea was evidently Parvin’s inspiration at that most critical period, as it had been for more than half a century. I visited him on one of his gloomiest days in that time of doubt and uncertainty. His determination to struggle on was not in the least shaken, but his opposition was so bitter and his election had been achieved with such effort and won by so small a margin that

the outlook was a gloomy one. I know that he had fears that his tenure of grand secretary and librarian might be very brief. He was certainly setting his house in order preparatory to leaving it. Possibilities in that direction could not be ignored, nor did they inspire cheerfulness. The statements in this paragraph I believe to be absolutely correct, though I depend wholly upon my recollection of conversations with Mr. Parvin and others.

But what splendid results came from that majority of a single vote? The Masonic Library and Museum were saved to the order and the people of Iowa, and Parvin was retained to carry forward and develop his wise plans which reach out into the long future. "One majority" had turned the tide, and his opposition faded out and was heard of no more. From that time his great undertaking steadily grew in appreciation and popularity. As his plans and purposes became more distinctly understood, so his own hold upon the confidence of the great fraternity yearly increased. He was re-elected year after year as the unanimous choice of the Grand Lodge. His last election took place when it was known that he had but a few days to live, and a committee was sent to carry the news to him on his death bed. Such positions of implicit trust and confidence, continued for half a century, seldom come to any one. To no other Iowa man has been vouchsafed a career so unique, or in a larger measure useful to the State and the people. Never an office-seeker, he was in public life from the time he crossed the Mississippi until he breathed his last. His life was filled with good works and they live after him.

JARED FERGUSON died at Decorah, Iowa, September 1, 1895. He was born at Bolton, Conn., February 11, 1794, and was therefore 101 years, 6 months and 19 days old. He was a soldier of the war of 1812, and was believed by his friends to have been its last survivor in Iowa.

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