

## Henn, Williams & Co.

John Duncombe's journal never defined with any precision his relationship with the real estate firm of Henn, Williams & Co., but the relationship was central to his rising political and economic standing in the 1850s. In his journal on April 13, 1856, Duncombe reported proudly, "I am in the employ of Williams Henn & Co.," and on August 16 the same year he announced his agreement "to go into partnership with Williams Henn & Co. for five years from the first day of October next." Duncombe was the company's man on the scene in Fort Dodge, keeping an eye on things, and for most of the period covered by his journal Henn, Williams & Co. kept him plenty busy.

Bernhart Henn and Jesse Williams were among the leading land speculators in the trans-Mississippi West before the Civil War. Their company dealt in huge tracts of Iowa land with an eye to encouraging agricultural settlement. Based in Fairfield,

Henn and Williams also platted towns and provided a modicum of expertise in dealing with the state and federal bureaucracies involved in land sales. Both men knew the system well, each having spent a good part of his career in government service of one kind or another.

Henn had been register of the U.S. Land Office in Fairfield and later ran successfully for the U.S. House of Representatives. When Duncombe went to Washington, D.C., in December 1856, he was visited in his hotel room by Congressman Henn

along with Senator George W. Jones, Democrat of Iowa. On subsequent visits to the Capital, Henn would also introduce Duncombe to presidents Pierce and Buchanan.

Jesse Williams was as well known in Democratic Party circles as his business partner, having come to Iowa in 1838 as Democratic territorial governor Robert Lucas's personal assistant. Governor Lucas had put Williams to work choosing quarters for territorial offices, organizing government departments, and traveling throughout the territory on official business. Williams had been employed by the U.S. Surveyor General before he met Governor Lucas, and riding across Iowa in 1838 and 1839 he looked at the territory's landforms and waterways with a surveyor's eye.

In 1840 Williams published a 180-page book titled *A Description of the United States Lands in Iowa*, which included a map drawn by the author and gave "a minute description of every section and quarter section, quality of soil, groves of timber,

FAIRFIELD	CHARITON
BERNHART HENN	BERNHART HENN
JESSE WILLIAMS	JESSE WILLIAMS
GEO. D. TEMPLE	GEO. D. TEMPLE
	EDWARD A. TEMPLE

**HENN, WILLIAMS & Co.**  
**DEALERS IN LAND, LAND WARRANTS & EXCHANGE**  
**FAIRFIELD, CHARITON, SIOUX CITY**  
**and FT DODGE, IOWA.**

Special attention given to LOCATION of LAND the sale & loan of Warrants and to the collecting & remitting of sight and time bills  
 Investments made in any part of IOWA

Detail from an 1855 Iowa map shows the reach of Henn, Williams & Co. (who also published the map; see page 50).

prairies, ledges of rock, coal banks, iron and lead ores, waterfalls, mill-seats, etc." The author assured potential buyers that the "book and the map will furnish the possessor with more information concerning Iowa than can be obtained from any other source." Land speculators on the Iowa frontier rarely knew as much about the property they bought and sold as Jesse Williams did. By 1850 — having held several government jobs, edited a newspaper, and directed a Des Moines River improvement project — Williams was on his way to Fairfield from Iowa City to join Bernhart Henn's real estate company, and ready to make his fortune.

Henn, Williams & Co. was never a small company. Its dealings in land were to be large-scale, and to facilitate its land deals Henn and Williams — along with George D. Temple and Edward A. Temple — organized Fairfield's first bank. (Twenty-year-old Edward Temple, then an employee of Henn, Williams, was just beginning a career in finance that would eventually lead to his founding of the Bankers Life insurance company in Des Moines in 1879.) With the combination of Williams's talents in the field and the bank's help in facilitating land transfers, the firm was able to take full advantage of the surge of settlement that occurred in Iowa in the 1850s.

In 1854 the Fort Dodge Company, in which Henn, Williams & Co. held a majority interest, bought the site of the abandoned garrison as part of a broader plan to lay out towns and sell lots along announced railroad routes, profiting from rising land values once the railroads arrived. At times the interests of the Fort Dodge Company needed daily attention. This was the work John Duncombe did — platting subdivisions and staking and entering claims. Henn and Williams themselves occasionally visited Fort Dodge, but even when present they relied on him to know whom to see and what to do to meet the company's local objectives. Still in his twenties, John Duncombe worked hard, made money for the company, and got a good start on his own fortune.

— by Bill Silag

SHSI (DES MOINES)



Bernhart Henn



15th Pleasant day, assisting H. W & Co in their business

16th. I agree to go into partnership with Williams Henn & Co for five years from the first day of October next, with the time fixed at 5 years We are to build a banking house in the spring that will cost about \$3000. dollars.

17th Sunday. I go with Ruggels to Webster City & find out about the Election. The probability is that the Black Republicans have whipped us badly. Rains on us

18th I get up a petition for a loan of \$200,000 of the credit of the County of Webster to the Dubuque & Pacific Rail Road Company I doubt the principle & the pol[?], but I think it will do well enough. Go to Homer Butterworth signs the petition

19th Go from Homer to Fort Dodge this morning. All passes off very pleasantly. I get about 150 to 200 signers to my petition & get the proclamation issued

20th Pleasant day. little rain. Time spent in my office

21st Cool cloudy morning.

22nd Cool nights. in my office quite busy.

23d Cool nights. In my office in the forenoon. In the afternoon go over to Webster City.

24th Sabbath — I stayed all night at Mr Willsons. Mr Willson my candidate to the legislature is beaten in this district by 14 votes by rejecting 36 legal votes that were written in the Poll Book Walter Willson instead of Walter C. Got deed for 4 lots in Webster City

25th. Spend my time in my office. Maj Williams suit is put off to the 25th Oct. 1856. Bring suit Bell vs Parker in Replevin. Dont think I have the legal right but I'll try.

26th Garaghty & myself go to Webster City & bring suit against Kellogg, in favor of W C Willson Stay all night at Willsons. I killed 3 prairie chickens. 1st I ever killed

27th The papers are served on Kellogg by H.B. Martin Kill one chicken only Get home to Fort Dodge early in the day, before evening

28th Stay in my office. No news. Seems rather dull times just now

29th W C Willson & Rosenkrans come over from Webster City. They tire out their horse about 8 miles from here & walk in. The Black Republicans held a meeting here a night or two since in which they passed resolutions against Rosenkrans appointing Beecher Democrat, Deputy. dis clerk and sent word to

## *Shoot a prairie Henn with my revolver.*

Mr Rosenkrans that he must oust him So he comes over and "ousts" him and appoints Little "Cape Cod" his deputy. Now look out for fish. — If this is not proscription I dont understand the term.

A beautiful party, & a beautiful man that would obey the dictates of such a party, beautiful indeed!

I took horse & buggy & took Mr Willson & Rosenkrans out and got home to Fort Dodge about 10 or 11 oclock. I acted like a good Samaritan, Mr Rosenkrans observed to me Yes said I for you have "fallen among thieves and Robbers" and I will pour on the oil & dress your wounds.

Aug 30th 1856 I go out with Mr A S White to hunt prairie chickens. It is very hot and we dont find any of any account. The first chicken he shot was a ground squirrel & the last, a blak bird & the fatest one of all a good armful of Messrs Smith & Prindles green corn.

I shot one on the wing the first I ever shot on the wing, & killed several blackbirds and one wood Pecker.

Shame on such "nimrods"

I dont know as there is anything of importance in this weeks newspaper, unless it be that Lane has succeeded in landing his Black Republican allies and I hear that there has been quite a battle in which several of them have been killed and a good many more out to be and will be if they succeed in making civil war general

Sunday Aug. 31st 1856 Warm, pleasant, agreeable day.

Sept. 1st 1856 Monday. Go to Kossuth County Meet Judge Call above Lots Creek. Shoot a prairie Henn with my revolver. Go down to Millers at the forks of the river. Stay there all night I have driven about 55 or 60 miles to day.

McKnight has about four buildings in his town called Dakota City.



Richards has lain out a town just this side of Lots Creek.

2 Stay in my office, & fool away the day

3 ditto.

Sept 4, 1856 In my office. Very strange weather, cool days and cool nights. The nights have been extraordinary cold the last three weeks. Corn and potatoes & all crop are very fine

5th In my office until about noon. It rains hard. Every thing looks Gloomy. Start [?] the rails for Border Plains

Go to Dawes & Bushes to electioneer on the subject of a rail Road subscription of 200,000\$ to the Capital stock of the Dubuque and Pacific Rail Road Company. Make RR speech at schoolhouse.

6th Stay all night at John Tolmans. I never experienced a more soaking rain, Harder thunder and more severe lightning. Go to Hooks Point.

Sept 7th 56 Sunday. Go with W.C. Willson to Boonsboro, to the canvass for Representative. Get some splendid melons to eat at the house of Ross.

Have a real spat about the Rail Road subscription. He — Ross gets good natured and I do to. So we part, after showing our teeth.

Monday, 8th Attend the canvass at Boonsboro. Judge Ripa from Greene Co there. Also Judge Montgomery

*Hurrah for the Rail Road! Was never so busy in my life*

from Boone Co. and Squirt [?] Richards Hon Prosecuting Attorney alias, Persecutor, of Webster Co.

An awful time at this canvass and no mistake Willson & I dug into them for a canvass, as he had the majority but they adjourned and would not canvass the votes. A funny, funny time. Hurrah for our side!

Tuesday Sept. 9th 1856 Went to Webster City. Stayed with Devote all night at Willsons. One of the most laughable times I ever heard debating the question

whether vegetable diet was not far better for the Human system than when meat was used. [Sumler?] Willson & D Benedict on the affirmative and Salsbury and myself on the negative.

Finally we meat eaters after citing the instance in which vegetables injured the intellect in the case of Nebechudnezor in which it made him like an ox. We got to trying our strength and we meat eaters gained the argument

10th Went to Homer. then to Border Plains then to Fort Dodge Electioneering on [?] Rail Road subscription.

Thursday the 11th Sept 1856 Warm pleasant day. I spend my time in my office writing letters and fixing up my business

12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, & even 22. Spend all the time night & day Electioneering for Webster County to take \$200,000 of the Stock of the Dubuque and Pacific Rail Road Company I have an awfully exciting time but my friends stand right up to me and we whip our enemies, by 125, Majority with a vote less than 800 in the county. I bet 20\$ win it & give it back to my opponent Mr Bagg.

Great personalities. Sharp & bitter retorts. I stump the County and finally succeed.

Hurrah for the Rail Road! Was never so busy in my life

Tuesday Sept. 23 1856 Mr Wood & I go over to Webster City and have a good old time rejoicing

The weather has been extremely cold for some time past. Hard frost for at least 3 nights in succession The corn foder is killed and all the late corn, a very extraordinary season all through. Not a real hot day all summer & the coldest spring and winter on record

24 Go from Webster City to Fort Dodge. Spend the balance of the day in my office.

Thursday Sept 25, 1856 Cool but very pleasant day. Quite smoky. I spend my time in my office bringing up my much neglected business.

I am going to give my time in the future more emphatically in business

26th Spent my time in my office in the forenoon — in the afternoon I went down the river to see & sue old John Speer. I sued him for 500\$ Agreed to give him all the time I could

I shot with a gun that I bought of Frank Reno,



4 prairie chickens. gave them to Dr. Olney.

27th Spend my time in my office. Garaghty & I buy a qr sec school land together It rains a little in the afternoon Quite cool today

Sunday Sept 28th 1856 Spend my time in my office reading the News Papers nearly all day

Sept 29th Go with Mr. M.S. Wood to Webster City. No, I go with C.C. Carpenter for Mr. MS Wood. I am figuring with the Willsons to buy A.J. Brewers place. I think it will be a very fine Speculation.

Sept 30th We manage all day until late in the afternoon and finally succeed in getting Mr Brewers place. I think in the final result, out of my one fourth interest I will clear at least 3000 or 4000 Dollars, if I am not very greatly mistaken

Oct 1st 1856 Wednesday I stayed last night with Willsons and today I go over to Fort Dodge on the stage. This morning a few flakes of snow fell. The first of the season. The snow is a little earlier than we had last year at this time.

Oct 2d I spend my time in my office, looking up my causes in court. I have about 8 or nine.

Rather a poor show if the land was my entire business.

Oct 3 Warm pleasant weather in my office.

4 Warm pleasant day. Shot 11 prairie chickens coming up from Nettletons

Sunday Oct. 5th 1856 Took a ride out with Mr N B Morrison out to his place over the river. This is one of the most lovely days I have ever seen.

Took dinner at Mr Morrisons

6th Maj Williams left for the river, to take Mary to school.

Court commences this week. Judge McFarland with a beard at least ten inches long. Powerful build — a voice like a bull dog.

"Old Timber" Croker Berkley Ellwood, Garghty myself, J.B. Hall et al the lawyers

E H West Sheriff C B Richards Pros Atty

Tuesday Oct 7th 1856 Court convenes in Hodges Stable on Williams Street. The weather is warm and

pleasant. We dont need any fire yet and I hope we shall not for some time to come. There are 45 cases on the Docket this year and the judge gets them all off of the Docket in two days. He is one of the fastest judges to wind up business that I ever saw He can't be beat for this. A good deal of fun takes place this evening in the courtroom

8 Warm pleasant day. Court continues. One of the worst sprees I ever saw I was in my office locked in and three or four men came down and forced me away. And took me to the hotel where there was an awful spree going on. Chairs were broken and I got a black eye before I got out of the Scrape

9th '56 An indictment found against me by the Grand Jury, with W O Ruggles, E E Colburn & Maj Williams for taring & feathering Myron Smith & John H. Busey & pulling down Buseys house. The venue is changed to Hardin County on application of the State and by my consent

10th Court continues and the county officers, viz. Woolsey Gregory, & Messervey are all indicted for official misconduct.

Court adjourns today. Go to Webster City with Wood & Morrison

11th Warm pleasant day. Start for home. The air becomes dark and damp Spend the evening at Morrisons. Great sport

Sunday 12th 1856 Pleasant day. I spend my time in my office writing letters. Get quite tired. Wrote a great many letters

13th Warm pleasant day

14th Pleasant day. I never saw a more beautiful fall.

15th Pleasant day. In my office.

16 Pleasant day In my office

17 Pleasant day In my office

18th Went up to Lumpkins to trade horses, could not come it.

Sunday 19th 1856 Warm pleasant day. I spend my time in my office reading the news and writing letters