

John F. Duncombe (undated photograph, probably 1860s or early 1870s)

“A reckless life of three years in Iowa”

**The diary of a young attorney,
John Duncombe, 1856–1859**

*Prologue and Diary Transcription
by Roger B. Natte*

When John Francis Duncombe first arrived in Fort Dodge in 1855, he brought with him a sound education, a driving ambition, and the sorrow of a new marriage cut short.

Born October 22, 1831, on a farm in Erie County, Pennsylvania, Duncombe began his education in a country school. By age 22 he had diplomas and high honors from Centre College (in Danville, Kentucky) and Allegheny College (in Meadville, Pennsylvania), had read law with area attorneys, had been admitted to the bar, and had entered into private practice in Erie. He had also married Carrie Perkins, of Erie, on December 29, 1852.

After Carrie died on November 19, 1854, Duncombe set out for the West. Borrowing \$300 from his father, he headed for frontier Iowa, where opportunities in land investment promised great rewards.

In April 1855 Duncombe arrived in Fort Dodge. The abandoned military post was now a settlement of only several dozen people, but the future promised rapid growth. The town was to be the site of

the next U.S. land office and was also on the proposed route of a railroad originating in Chicago, which would pass through Dubuque, Fort Dodge, and other cities in northern Iowa as it headed west.

With boundless enthusiasm and drive, John F. Duncombe soon became a dominant force in Fort Dodge. What motivated him to keep a diary in those early years? No reason is clear. It may have been simply to record and reflect on his activities, ideas, and feelings. What is obvious is that he fully expected someone in the future to read his diary, as he specifically indicates in one of his entries. Yet Duncombe wrote without inhibition. His journal entries are characterized by a plainspoken and often blunt candor. He was not afraid to describe situations that may have been embarrassing and even legally incriminating, had they come to light when he was writing. Certainly it would appear that Duncombe included in his journal all personal situations and public events that had any importance to him.

Maybe Duncombe also wrote because he had

the time to write. Life in frontier Fort Dodge did not follow a frantic pace. On some days, as the journal indicates, there was not much to keep him busy. He had time to reflect.

Duncombe's roles in Fort Dodge — attorney, land agent, speculator, newspaper owner and editor — were among those likely to lead to greater opportunities in 1850s Iowa. But even though Duncombe, on most days, had great confidence and aspirations, for himself and for his town and county, success was not guaranteed. The economic panic of 1857 affected railroads and land speculation in Iowa as well as in the rest of the United States. Locally Duncombe was competing with nearly two dozen other land agents and attorneys serving Fort Dodge and Webster County in 1858. His third challenge to success was his deep commitment to the Democratic Party at a time when Iowa was becoming a strong Republican state. And then there was the matter of personal happiness. Would that ever be his, he wondered often enough in his diary.

John Francis Duncombe's entire two-volume diary — from January 1, 1856, through early February of 1859 — is published here for the first time. The epilogue summarizes Duncombe's life in later decades. Commentary accompanying the diary fleshes out some of the individuals he encounters and explains the issues and controversies swirling around Duncombe in these heady days of early statehood.

Certainly no single individual had more influence in molding the future of Fort Dodge. But this is not a diary about the life of one man, or the development of one town, or the organization of one county. Like the 1855 map that opens this issue, the diary covers the breadth of Iowa, as Duncombe travels across the young state, diving into politics, rubbing shoulders with the powerful, wishing for a wife, platting land for settlers and speculators, and endeavoring to earn himself a good name.

Welcome to the world of John Duncombe and Iowa in the late 1850s.

Notes on the Diary

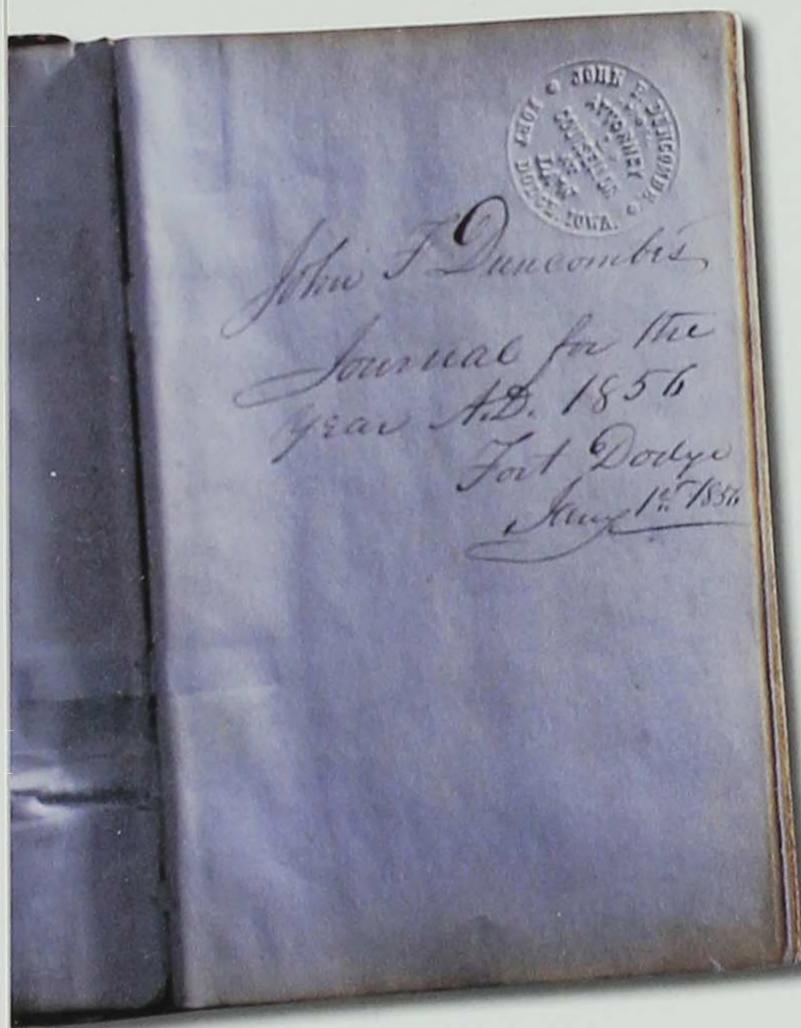
Because the John Duncombe diary is a significant primary source for Iowa history, and because Duncombe wrote about numerous individuals and places in Iowa history, we believe it's essential that the published transcription reproduce the original handwritten document as accurately as possible. Therefore, we have retained Duncombe's occasional slips of the pen or interrupted thoughts, his underlining or striking out of certain words, and his inconsistent or nonstandard spelling, capitalization, and punctuation (or lack of punctuation). Two spaces indicate where Duncombe appeared to be starting a new sentence, but without benefit of a preceding period or a capitalized first word. Where Duncombe drew a small hand with a finger pointing to an entry,

we use the typographical hand symbol used by 19th-century printers. We have, however, standardized the dateline of each entry by setting it in italics and flush left.

Though a well-educated man, Duncombe did not always spell the names of places or individuals consistently (even within the same diary entry) or correctly (if we use county histories and other historical records as the standard). Consider, for instance, his five different spellings of "Mississippi." Some of these variant spellings might be explained by the circumstances—writing while traveling on a steamboat, scrawling hurried notes before bed—or his own uncertainty or carelessness, or our own difficulty in reading his handwriting. Words or initials that we could not decipher are indicated by a question mark within brackets [?]. Brackets around a word indicate a reasonably certain guess of what Duncombe meant.

Both volumes of the diary are in the collections of the Webster County Historical Society in Fort Dodge. (One was donated by Thomas Gilligan, whose wife, Katherine, was a private nurse for Mary, wife of William Duncombe, one of John Duncombe's sons.) There is no indication in the diary or in Duncombe's other records that additional journals either preceded or followed these two volumes, although, as diary transcriber Roger Natte points out, the abrupt way in which the entries start on January 1, 1856, suggests that keeping a journal was not a new experience for Duncombe. —*The Editor*





Opening page of the two-volume diary begun by 24-year-old John Duncombe.

JANY 1st 1856

Another year has rolled away. Its gone. Its memory is all that remains. Good and Evil are strangely mingled in the past. But the Good deeds of men can be made no better and what wicked persons have done cannot be undone.

My own life for the year past I must say has been one of far greater pleasure than I anticipated it would be one year ago to day. Then the future seemed dark. It was mingled with the painful recollections of the past. But my own experience teaches me not to anticipate troubles.

I spend my time in the office this first and second day of January 1856

Thursday Jany 3d 1856 I start in an open waggon with Cady, McBane, Gower and Bagg with \$100,000 gold to take to St Louis for the land office. The Thermometer is 26° degrees below zero. We ride in an open lumber waggon with mules

Jany 4th 1856 Stayed last night at Hardins Slept around the Stove. Poor McBane froze his ear yesterday and Poor Bagg came very near freezing last night. We keep good watch over the 4 boxes of gold in our charge. We sleep with the boxes under our heads. Stay to night at Hendersons 20 miles North of Ft Des Moines

Jany 5th, 1856 The weather still continues very cold — most of the time below zero at least ten degrees. Cross over a big prairie and stay to night at Keith's 14 miles East of Ft Des Moines

Jany 6th 1856 Sunday — Ride all day in the cold Snow flies. Stay in a new house colder than Greenland. Got my back out in the weather and found the marrow nearly frozen up. I was so bad off from a cold that I could scarcely speak loud. Got dinner — felt quite poorly to day.

Jany 7th 1856. Rode all day in the cold very cold, it is difficult to keep from freezing.

Jany 8th 1856 Rode all day to Iowa City. This is the coldest day I ever saw. Mercury 32° degrees below zero. Iowa Democratic State Convention meet here to day. I attend the convention at night. Stay at the Tremont house — Sleep on the floor Have hard time to keep from freezing.

Jany 9th 1856 Started from Iowa City — Rather intended to start. did not start. waited for the cars.

The Rail Road from here to Davenport is the first built in the State of Iowa. This is just commenced to run. Has no regular time yet. No depot here yet — all very new — An important Era in the history of this State

Jany 10th 1856 Yesterday the Mercury stood at 29° below zero. Horrible cold weather for a pleasure ride! To day it is a trifle warmer about 20 below zero. Travel to Muscatine in the waggon. Stay at the Oglevie House. A very fine ball here Splendid ladies. How like human it made me feel. We have a bottle of brandy — Bad — Bad — Bad. —

Jany 11th 1856 This morning had a spree with Bagg. Came near whipping him — Glad I did not.

Cold — Rode to Davenport Much of the time on the ice on the Mississippi river.

Crossed over the river on the ice to Rock Island. Stopped at the Island City House. This is an excellent house kept by Arnold and Lacksburry.

Rock Island and Davenport contains about 9000 inhabitants each. Burlington, Keokuk and Dubuque about 1200. Dubuque is a little the largest of the three. I think Keokuk will eventually be the largest town in this Stat. Its prospects have been excellent.

Jany 12th 1856 Took the cars at 9 o'clock A.M. for LaSalle. Thence on the central R.Road to Sandoval 60 miles East of St. Louis. Stopped by a train of cars running off the track. The Engineer killed. An awful Smash up.

Jany 13th 1856 Got to St Louis today. Stay over night.

in the morning we deposit our Gold with the assistant sub-treasurer all right.

Jany 14th 1856 Buy 25\$ worth of clothing and start for Pennsylvania with Bagg. Get an awful ducking by the water tank being let loose about $1/2$ past 2 o'clock.

Jany 15th 1856 Go from Vincennes to Indianapolis in Indiana. I visit the State house. Go through the Town. I call it rather a pretty Town. Contains about 10,000 inhabitants. Go to Crestline 75. miles from Cleveland. The Snow is very deep here. about 2 feet.

Jany 16th 1856 Start from Crestline for Cleveland Go on to Erie Arrive there in the Evening. Stay at Mr. Otis house. Just nine months from Erie. I am quite a hawk Eye!

Jany 17th. 1856. I start for fathers in the Stage I stop at old Hathaways. he charges me ten cents for warming Rich! Wasnt it?

I get home to day. Meet father and mother on their way to Wattsburg. They did not recognize me. That was funny (?) All the folks were well and I was very glad.

Jany 18th 1856 At house — happy

Jany 19th 1856 At home — Start for quarterly meeting at Bever dam. Stay with Lester Perkins tonight.

Jany 20th 1856 At quarterly meeting. Get dinner at Mr Crooks. Ride home — Finest kind of sleighing.

Jany 21st 22d, 23d 1856 At home — bid friends "good by" Stay with Old Judge Vincents in Waterford.

Jany 24th, 1856. Go to Erie. Stay tonight at Mr [Janes?].

Jany 25th 26th Visit in Erie — have a pleasant time indeed.

Jany 27th 1856 At quarterly meeting hear two excellent Sermons from Leslie & Lyon

Jany 28, 1856 Messrs Janes and Berst give me six dollars which will make me square with them in their land entries for all my fees. I now have enough of their money to pay for entering one quarter section of land and have the fees paid for doing it. R. T. Sterrett gives me \$10.50 to give to A.J. Sterrett. I give him a receipt for his money Start for Iowa at 2. P.M.

Jany 29th 1856 I stayed last night with John A Vincent No. 242. Superior Street Cleveland. The cars did not make their connexion.

Jany. 30. 1856 I start at 8. o'clock A.M. for Chicago. About ten miles East of Chicago get blocked in with the snow.

Jany 31st 1856 Stayed blocked in with the snow from about 2 or 3 o'clock last night until about one or two o'clock to day. Get hauled out. The paddys dig out a Road. We were compelled to dig a Road or stay in the snow. We burned up board fence for fuel and Eat Skunk.

I saw two very loving ones in the seat ahead of me They were both of Illinois Or at least the man had lived there as he told me Every little while when he had carefully surveyed the premises in the dark he ~~would place his lips to the lips of the lady~~ and "Suck" hence the name of "Suckers" I was amused! Guess anyone would have been. They both looked as if they ~~would like to but could not~~ under the circumstances.

Feb 1st 1856 Started for Dubuque. Saw one clinch and almost a fight. Both parties showed their teeth if not their courage.

Crossed the Mississippi on the ice after dark.

Feb 2d 1856 Stayed at the Peasly house until 4 o'clock A.M. Then started with ten passengers, a very cold blustery day for Ft Dodge. I rode 30 miles on the outside of the stage — like to froze. Then I got in at Rockway and of course some body must ride on the outside. A little Englishman tried it and like to froze up.

Stopped to night at Independence 75 miles from Dubuque Had a very good supper and comfortable bed. Then went on to Cedar falls one hundred miles. I guess we stopped here to stay over Sunday.

Feb 3d 1856 Stayed at Cedar Falls today with my old College friend B.R. Speer. I contented myself by going to church.

A. Mullarky is the wealthiest man in the town now This place and Waterloo are now at logger heads about the County seat [?]

Waterloo is the County seat.

Feb 4th 1856 Started and rode to Reles for dinner 12 miles then 14 to Parrotts. Old Parrott is rich if he only knew it.

Feb 5th 1856 Rode 20 miles to Iowa Falls Here are ledges of rock some of them a very good quality of

marble. here I got dinner then rode to Pilgrims grove where I saw a tall [?] and stage drivers get drunk.

Feb 6th 1856 Rode 50 miles to Ft Dodge home again after an absence of one month and three days.

7th Stayed in the office nearly all day and talked and rested.

8th Stayed in the office. Today first spoke of agitating the subject of County seat. Some thought it doubtful. Some premature.

9th In the office today. Wrote letters

10th Sunday Started with Vincents team in company with Sewall Gower for Willsons at Newcastle. Had a talk with them about the county seat. They wanted it at their town if possible but finally consented that if we would go in with them for a division of the Counties North and South on the old line between Risley and Yell and for a tier of Townships off of Wright County they would go in with us for a division of the County North and South and assist us in the removal of the County seat of Webster Co from Homer where it is now located to our place — so we agreed and stayed there all night.

11th Started with Gower for Homer. Went to Messervey Co Judge and showed him our petition for the removal of the County seat. Also the notices for the removal of the County seat. Said they were sufficient. Said that if we got a majority of the voters in the county according to the last Poll Book he would issue an order of Election for the purpose of taking the vote at the April Election. Put up a notice in Newcastle — 3 in Homer and one at Hardins, sent Gower Home with one for Tolmans one for [Bentleys?] one for Fort Dodge.

Febry 12th 1856. Stayed last night with old man West. He is Sheriff of Webster Co. He is drunk about half of the time. Great shame to himself and the County.

This morning I started down the river a foot for Bells to get signers to my petition I was to get Isaac Bells at his two sons, Jackques and finally stopped at Jacob Bells. Stayed here all night. Slept very comfortably. He lives in a cabin about four or five miles below the mouth of the Boone River

13th Went from Bells to Hursts, Richies and finally to Paines. Here I saw a frozen Elk and lots of deer. The old man and his son were great hunters. Their cabin

was without a window, and the light come in through a little hole about 3 inches acrost over the door. The chimney was only about half built up and when the wind blowed over the house it was filled with smoke. This was the state of the case this night, and I was compelled to cry until the fire went out. Corn cakes — hoe cake, fat pork and venison — with strong coffee constitutes the diet of these pioneers.

I travelled about 2 or 3 miles over the snow where it was about knee deep and So badly crusted that about every fifth step would bear me. I like to have tired out. But I am here writing hearty as ever for all that I see.

14th This morning it was storming. I found the walking terrible. I got to Willsons about noon. He agreed to go for Fort Dodge in the Election I wrote him a petition. He agreed to circulate it for me. I went on to B.H. Allison's and got my dinner.

I stayed at Allison's all night He would not tell what he would do. I dont know whether he will be for or against us but prospects are that he will be against us unless we buy him in some way.

Febry 15th 1856. Started from Allison's went to John Beams at the mouth of Crooked Creek, Old Johnny promised to go for us. I went to Humphreys. He said He would go for us. Then to old man Johns and he said he would go for us. Then I went down on to the River and in crossing I got in and got a good soaking. Rather a narrow escape from going under the ice. Then I went up to Nettleton's place of drawing logs to his saw mill. Then I went to Esq Johnson's. I labored hard with Tolman and some others who had signed the remonstrance, but I used every argument. And he agreed to do no more against us. To day for the first time in ten weeks it thawed

16th To day I started for Fort Dodge But the wind was directly in my face and it was the stormiest day that I ever saw. I went two miles, a good part of the way backwards to Barnes. Here I concluded that discretion was the better part of valor and therefore I stayed here all day and all night. I found Mrs Barnes a very pleasant woman. She looked quite tidy herself and kept her house so.

17th Sunday I started for Barnes afoot and got up to Bentleys and stoped Then I got a chance to ride to the Fort with Mr Rist. I spent my day in the office writing — I was interrupted by Powell Bush coming in to find out about his law suit with McBride. Nettleton the Justice had issued an execution against the said Bush