

# Marshalltown's Henry Anson Town Builder & Land Speculator

by Michael W. Vogt

When 25-year-old Henry Anson rode across the central Iowa prairie in the spring of 1851 and chose the future town site of Marshalltown, he claimed to have "found the prettiest place in the world." Undoubtedly, Anson saw not only a picturesque scene of nature's beauty but also the potential to profit from the resale of the land under his gaze.

Purchasing land and speculating that the price would rise was a common activity repeatedly played out as settlers trekked westward. Land speculation in Iowa, for example, exceeded that of any other state. Both the federal government and private entrepreneurs published literature advertising the natural and economic advantages of western settlement. For 19th-century speculators, the only requirement was enough money to purchase land from the government.

Historian Ray Allen Billington identifies two types of frontier speculator, the "small propertied farmers who acquired excess holdings in the hopes of resale, and the professional land jobber who absorbed . . . spots suitable for development as towns." Henry Anson's activities in Marshall County, like those of many other settlers on the frontier, do not fit conveniently into either category. Instead, he represents a successful hybrid of farmer and businessman. Furthermore, his diversified and adeptly timed investments and business activities filled the needs of the growing community of Marshalltown while increasing his own income and social status.



Henry Anson, as portrayed in an 1867 history of Marshall County.

The story of Henry Anson as speculator and entrepreneur is not another stereotypical, romanticized account of a settler building a cabin and overcoming the burdens of frontier life. Rather it personifies the story of land speculation on the Iowa frontier in the 1850s and provides what historian Susan Gray calls "the specificity of time and place."

The county of Marshall was established in early January 1846—the year Iowa became a state—and was organized in 1849. According to a biography (circa 1890), "Anson had his eye on Marshall County from his start westward [because] it being

near the center of the State possibly some point in the county might be selected" as the new capital as the population expanded into central Iowa. From the time of Anson's arrival in Marshall County in 1851, he focused on establishing title to land, eliminating rival claimants, and developing the town site of Marshall (which was renamed "Marshalltown" in 1862, to end confusion with a Henry County town also named Marshall).

Anson immediately paid a squatter occupying a cabin to the south of the planned town site \$50 to vacate the area. Having seen the squatter off, Anson built the required "preemption cabin" in May 1851. (The cabin was built on the south side of what would become Main Street.) He then traveled to Dubuque to file the claim for 160 acres under the provisions of the 1841



Preemption Act, and headed back to his wife, Jennette, and two young sons in Illinois. Returning to the site in the spring of 1852, Anson bought 320 more acres north of his own claim; he paid \$400 to William Ralls for the land, on behalf of his brother-in-law John A. Kelly. In the summer of 1852, members of Anson's family and several in-laws arrived to settle the new community, including his mother and two sisters. His third son was born that year, Adrian Anson (who would later achieve baseball fame as "Cap" Anson).

The next summer the town was laid out. Stones marked street corners; wooden stakes marked off 60x180 foot lots (twelve per block). A Mr. Ridsen from Iowa City surveyed the town site and filed the plat in August with Marshall County Justice of the Peace Joseph M. Ferguson. The town was now officially on the Iowa map.

Anson eventually acquired hundreds of acres at the minimum price of \$1.25 per acre, buying land outright and through the purchase of military land warrants. His timing was impeccable and his choice of location beneficial. According to historian Robert Swierenga's studies of land speculation, the "per dollar earnings on frontier land investments in central Iowa in the mid-nineteenth century were superior to many other contemporary investment outlets." The proximity of the Iowa River just north of the town site encouraged settlement in Marshall Township and the two adjacent townships, through which the river coursed. Within the first four to seven years of settlement, 90 percent of the original entry acreage in these townships had been claimed, and by 1856, settlers had "improved" nearly two square miles in the county—accomplished by tediously breaking the tough prairie sod with single-share plows pulled by teams of oxen and horses.

County records document rising land prices during the town's first decade. In 1851 Anson originally paid \$1.25 an acre—about 31 cents for a quarter-acre, the size of a city lot. In 1854 one of these lots sold for \$50, resold two years later for \$100, and sold again the following year for \$125. In 1857 a corner lot at the intersection of Main Street and First Avenue sold for \$200. By 1862 the best business lots in town sold for \$1,000. Anson frequently sold land between February 1852 and March 1856. By 1860 he owned \$10,000 worth of real estate.

As historian Billington has written, "Speculators were everywhere along the fringes of settlement." The same was true in Marshall County. Even at the peak of Anson's speculative ventures, when he owned nearly 1,570 acres of Marshall County (about two and a half square miles), two others out-ranked him as original entrant landowners—Thomas Abell with some 3,700

acres and Delos Arnold with 3,200 acres. All government land in Iowa was purchased by 1865, bringing to an end large-scale speculation in the state.

Wisely, Anson diversified. While maintaining a town address, he owned and supervised a 1,000-acre farm south of Marshall, at a time when most farms were closer to 160 acres. Anson's farm was valued at \$8,000, including \$500 worth of implements and \$1,000 worth of livestock (8 horses, 15 milch cows, 25 swine). Anson probably hired tenant help, given the farm's yields: 1,000 bushels of wheat, 3,000 bushels of corn, 1,000 bushels of oats, 500 bushels of potatoes, 250 bushels of barley, 1,000 pounds of butter, 25 tons of hay, 250 gallons of molasses, 25 pounds of honey, and \$300 worth of slaughtered livestock. Despite the success of this enterprise, Anson stopped farming before 1870, presumably to direct more time toward managing his real estate, the neglect of which had caused some of his town properties to appear on the delinquent property tax list in 1863.

In addition to his roles as speculator and farmer, Anson was a town booster from the start, investing in the business development of the new town of Marshall. In 1852, well aware of the need for local building material, Anson ordered sawmill machinery, including a 30-horsepower steam engine from Ohio. It was transported by rail to Cleveland, by boat to Chicago, by rail to Rock Island, and then overland to Marshall. The early construction of sawmills (the first burned in 1856) demonstrates Anson's talent for providing citizens with what historian Lewis Atherton has called "the immediately useful and the practical." By 1860 his second \$2,000 sawmill investment was producing 400,000 board feet of lumber per year valued at \$8,000. He had also expanded the operation to include a sash-and-door factory and cabinet shop, with \$6,000 worth of yearly output. Despite the success of these ventures he sold the businesses during the 1860s, probably to focus more on his land investments, valued at \$17,500. Nevertheless, his penchant for "the immediately useful and the practical" did not stop with millwork, nor did his investments. He founded a brick and tile company in 1880 and a coal company in 1892. As late as 1887 he still owned 110 acres of town property.

From the beginning, Anson's investments primarily hinged on the growth and success of Marshall as a community. Marietta, just six miles to the northeast, was its nearest rival for business and settlers—and for county-seat status.

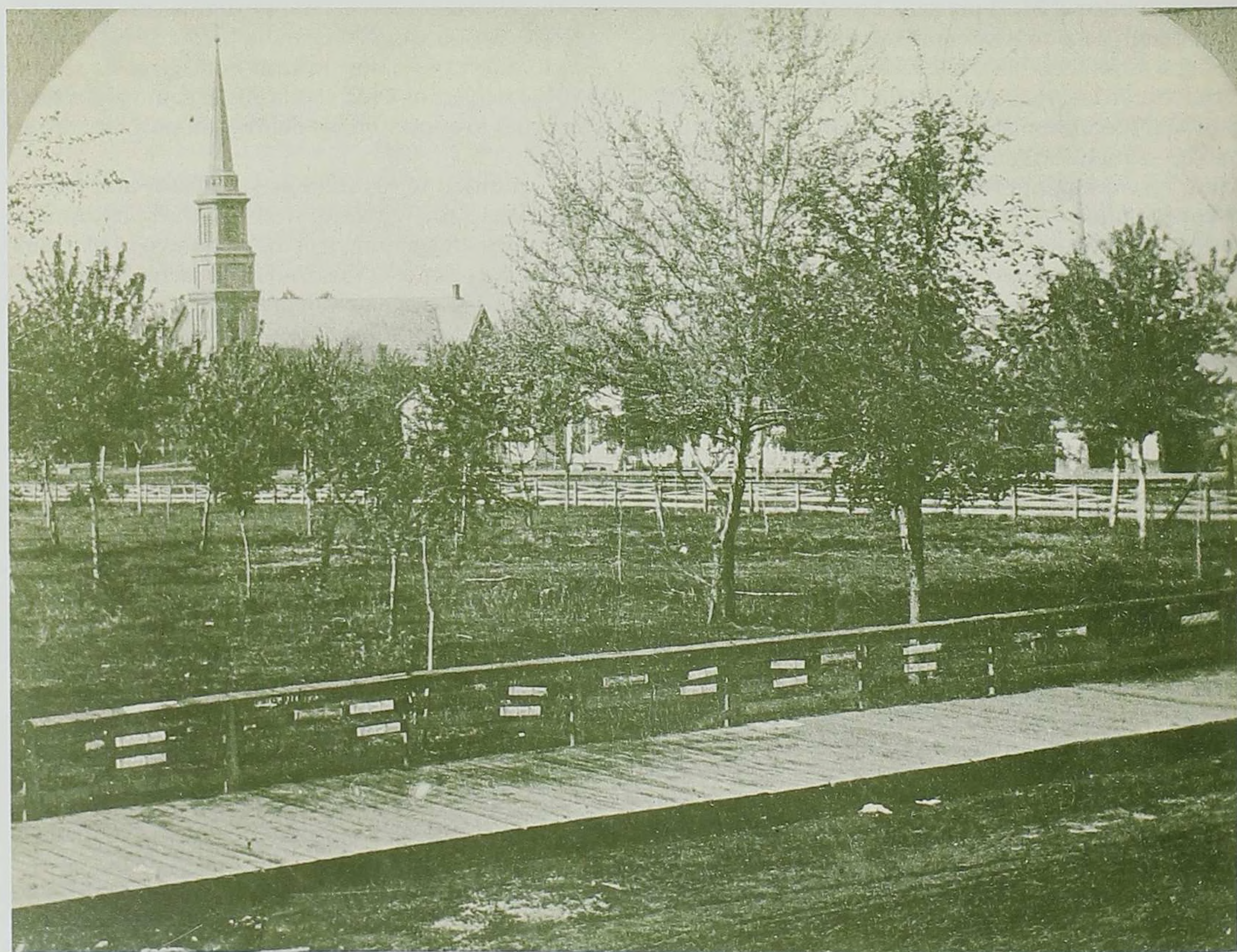


In the fall of 1851, according to an Anson biographer, commissioners had arrived to name the county seat. County seat towns were ideal locations for early merchants and tradesmen; county residents traveling to the courthouse to pay taxes or register claims were likely customers for town businesses. Anson and another man spent a day talking to the commissioners, "exhausting their logic in favor of Marshall for the county seat." Although the commissioners had agreed to visit Marshall, they instead chose Marietta "and fled the county—doubtless to escape the tongue lashing they would have received from Mr. Anson for their duplicity."

Marshall citizens were not about to give up on the county-seat battle. Thus was set into motion a seven-year squabble, barely avoiding gunfire. Anson was a major player; his "force of language," a biographer later

noted, "made him a most formidable antagonist." Anson bribed the county attorney with "\$100 and the deeds to a few lots" for his help. Using the federal land he had acquired cheaply, he offered a free town lot to any new settlers "likely to favor" Marshall in the struggle for the county seat. It is estimated that Anson gave away a "half mile square" in his campaign to attract settlers. Greenleaf Woodbury, for example, received 40 acres on the nearby Iowa River and a \$500 bonus in June of 1854 for constructing a gristmill to lure farmers to do business in Marshall. Soon other tradespeople and merchants located businesses in the community, which, by 1856, comprised 658 residents.

Although Marshall eventually proved victorious, being named the county seat in 1860, town boosters had lost sight of the bigger prize. They had failed to lure the



A wooden sidewalk borders Marshalltown's public square, dotted with young trees, in 1876. Anson and sons Sturgis and Adrian played baseball here before the courthouse was built in the mid-1880s. Adrian later achieved baseball fame as "Cap" Anson.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF MARSHALL COUNTY



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF MARSHALL COUNTY



This 1872 stereograph shows Greenleaf Woodbury's brick building on Main Street, 21 years after Henry Anson built his pre-emption cabin to claim the prairie land that would become Marshalltown, Iowa.

state capital to the same location, losing out to Des Moines in 1857. Anson later surmised that "if the same effort in time and money had been spent during the period of the seven years' war over the county seat, Marshalltown would today be the capital of Iowa."

By 1863, through the efforts of Greenleaf Woodbury, Marietta was effectively deprived of a rail line during this crucial period, thus ending its years of growth as a community. "The death blow had been given to Marietta," wrote a county historian in 1867. "Soon after, her wealthiest and most enterprising citizens sold out at a ruinous sacrifice, and went to Marshalltown to live, where they were heartily welcomed. The stores and shops soon followed, the brass band dispersed, the literary society was obscured, away sped the houses one after another down to the new city, which had become a vampire to suck [Marietta's] blood—the work of demolition went on, until now, Marietta, six miles from a railroad, dismantled and ruined, is left with scarcely a trace of her departed glory."

By comparison, Marshalltown in 1867 boasted 2,300 residents, described in a self-congratulatory county history as "intelligent, enterprising, and industrious." The effect of county-seat status on property values was terrific. By 1878 the value of Marshalltown's city lots exceeded \$634,000 (Marietta's, just over \$4,000). The following three decades were a period of unprecedented growth.

In his advancing years Anson could look back with pride at what had prospered from the town site he had chosen on the Iowa prairie in the spring of 1851. Self-described in 1888 as the "Queen City of the West," Marshalltown was home to over a dozen successful manufacturing and industrial concerns, seven public school buildings, a professional fire department and police force, an electrified streetcar system, over three miles of paved streets, and three railroads, securing its status as a "modern city" by the standards of the time. By the turn of the century Marshalltown's population topped 10,000.

Anson died of pneumonia on November 30, 1905, at age 79. His body lay in state at the county courthouse. All city buildings, council rooms, the mayor's office, police headquarters, and both fire stations were draped in mourning. All places of business were closed during the hour of his funeral. In a front-page obituary, the local *Times-Republican* eulogized that "after becoming the founder of the town [Anson] exercised a father's care and interest in its welfare. . . . Until he was replaced by younger and more active men, he was one of the city's leading and more influential citizens." Henry Anson's record of contributions to the community included donations of land for the first gristmill, fire station, and Anson School. He served on the city council in 1881 and was elected mayor for one term in 1891. The site of his brickyard became a public park bearing his name.



Right: Anson School, built in 1900, was named after the town founder. Below: Paved with bricks, lit by streetlights, and decked out in banners and flags, Marshalltown's Main Street bustles with pedestrians, businesses, and streetcars, shortly after the turn of the century.

*Anson School, Marshalltown, Iowa.*



BOTH IMAGES: SHSI (IOWA CITY)



The same obituary unfortunately included the incorrect assertion that Anson had donated the land where the courthouse now stands. That inaccuracy has continued down through the years to become a persistent local myth. Records on file at the offices of the county auditor and recorder, however, clearly indicate that Anson sold the "public square," where the present courthouse stands, to Marshall County in June 1881 for

\$2,000. The latest retelling of the myth is on a bronze plaque at the base of a recently erected life-sized statue of Anson on the courthouse square.

Today, the city of Marshalltown is a tangible link to the vision, business acumen, and determination of Anson to build a thriving community on the Iowa frontier—during a period when many Iowa towns did not survive. The story of its development from crude cabins and dirt streets into a major Iowa manufacturing center in the span of four decades underscores an exciting period of community boosterism when it was possible to make "nowhere somewhere." Through his efforts as a speculator, surveyor, farmer, real estate broker, businessman, and entrepreneur, Henry Anson is an inextricable part of Marshall County history and the larger story of land speculation in Iowa and the West. ♦

*Michael W. Vogt is curator for the Iowa Gold Star Military Museum at Camp Dodge in Johnston, Iowa. He is also a trustee of the State Historical Society of Iowa and co-chair of the Iowa Battle Flags Preservation Committee. This article developed from a paper delivered earlier at the Northern Great Plains History Conference. In 2003 his article "The Fighting 51st Iowa in the Philippines" appeared in this magazine.*

#### NOTE ON SOURCES

Piecing together the real estate activities of Henry Anson involved research in land records and abstracts; censuses; atlases; city and county directories and histories; and other recorder's and auditor's records. The c. 1890 biography of Anson appears in the "Old Settler's Record Book" (original at State Historical Society of Iowa [Iowa City], photocopy at the Historical Society of Marshall County, which also holds Anson's will and death certificate). Also helpful was the Historical Society of Marshall County museum exhibit, "Marshalltown the Modern City, 1870-1900" (1996).

The statement that land speculation in Iowa exceeded that of any other state appears in Paul W. Gates, "Land Policy and Tenancy in the Prairie States," *Journal of Economic History* (July 1941). See also Lewis Atherton, *Main Street on the Middle Border* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984); Ray Allen Billington, *America's Frontier Heritage* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1986); Benjamin F. Gue, *History of Iowa*, vol. 1 (New York: Century History Company, 1903); Roscoe Lokken, *Iowa Public Land Disposal* (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1942); Maureen Ogle, "Redefining 'Public' Water Supplies, 1870-1900: A Study of Three Iowa Cities," *Annals of Iowa* (Spring 1990) and "Efficiency and System in Municipal Services: Fire Departments in Iowa, 1870-1900," *Annals of Iowa* (Spring 1991); Earle D. Ross, *Iowa Agriculture* (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1951); Leland Sage, *A History of Iowa* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1974); Robert P. Swierenga, "Land Speculator 'Profits' Reconsidered: Central Iowa as a Test Case," *Journal of Economic History* (March 1966), and *Pioneers and Profits: Land Speculation on the Iowa Frontier* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1968). The quotation "nowhere somewhere" appears in Keith Wheeler, *The Townsman* (Alexandria: Time Life Books, 1975).

The courthouse square transfer occurred June 21, 1881. Anson was paid \$2,000.00 before Aug. 22, 1881, warrant no. 1341, "Deed conveying Pub. Square." The origin of the "donation" myth begins with Anson's Dec. 1, 1905, *Times-Republican* obituary: "Mr. Anson's largest gift... was the solid block in the center of the city known as the courthouse square." Anson's autobiographical account in the 1890 "Old Settlers' Record Book" did not claim to have donated any land for any courthouse. The Anson biography in Gue's *Biographies and Portraits of the Progressive Men of Iowa* (1899) says that Anson "contributed" the courthouse block. Land records in the county courthouse and title abstract indicate that Anson was paid for the ground known as the public square. In fact, Anson was paid \$325.00 for the land where the first courthouse was built. The myth has been perpetuated by later researchers who relied upon the obituary as fact and reprinted it in subsequent community histories without examining the original land records.

Annotations to this article are held in the *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* production files (SHSI-Iowa City).



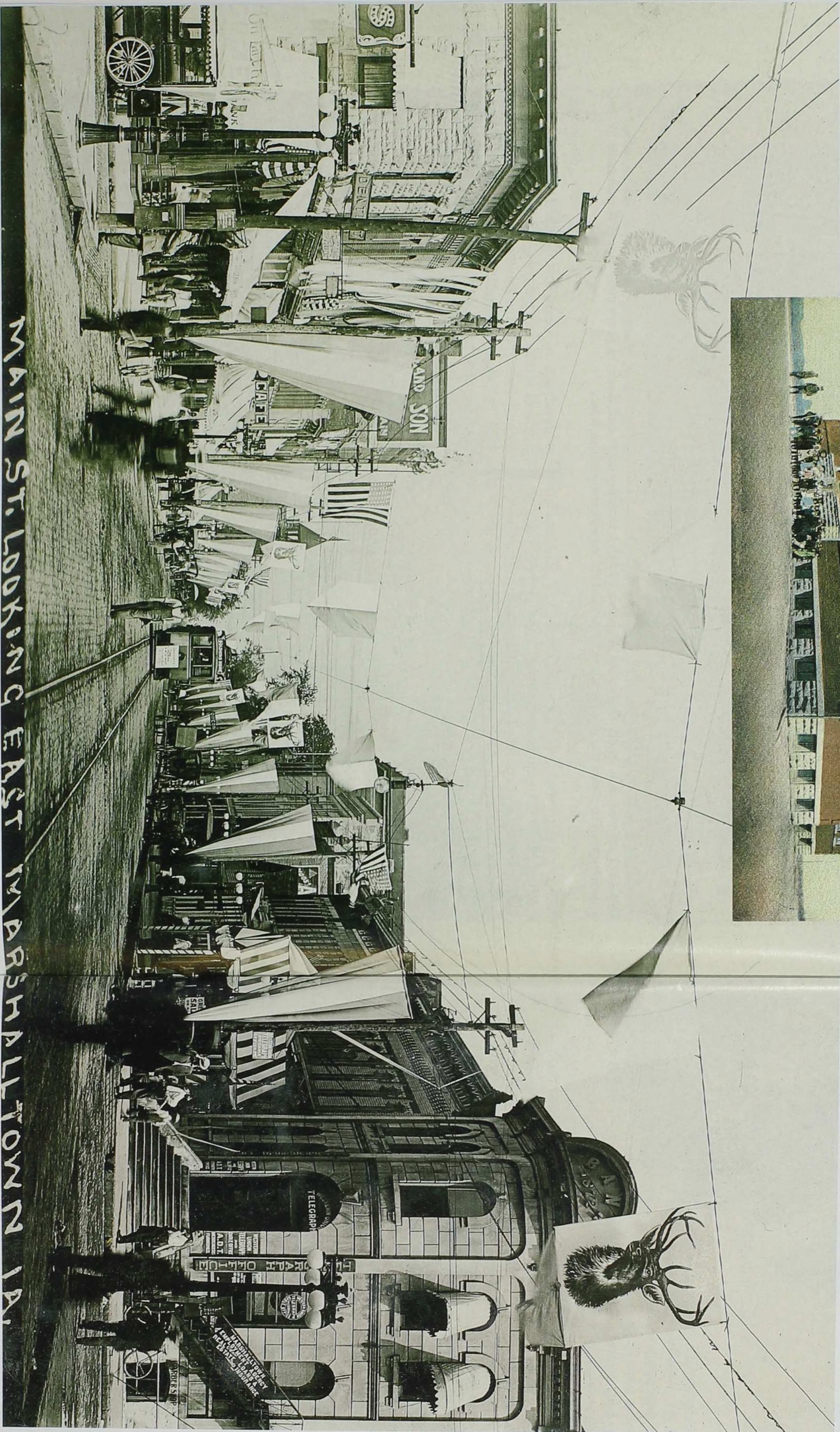


Right: Anson School, built in 1900, was named after the town founder. Below: Paved with bricks, lit by street-lights, and decked out in banners and flags, Marshalltown's Main Street bustles with pedestrians, businesses, and streetcars, shortly after the turn of the century.



Anson School, Marshalltown, Iowa.

The same obituary unfortunately included the incorrect assertion that Anson had donated the land where the courthouse now stands. That inaccuracy has continued down through the years to become a persistent local myth. Records on file at the offices of the county auditor and recorder, however, clearly indicate that Anson sold the "public square," where the present courthouse stands, to Marshall County in June 1881 for



MAIN ST. LOOKING EAST MARSHALLTOWN IA

\$2,000. The latest retelling of the myth is on a bronze plaque at the base of a recently erected life-sized statue of Anson on the courthouse square.

Today, the city of Marshalltown is a tangible link to the vision, business acumen, and determination of Anson to build a thriving community on the Iowa frontier—during a period when many Iowa towns did not survive. The story of its development from crude cabins and dirt streets into a major Iowa manufacturing center in the span of four decades underscores an exciting period of community boosterism when it was possible to make "nowhere somewhere." Through his efforts as a speculator, surveyor, farmer, real estate broker, businessman, and entrepreneur, Henry Anson is an inextricable part of Marshall County history and the larger story of land speculation in Iowa and the West. ❖

Michael W. Vogt is curator for the Iowa Gold Star Military Museum at Camp Dodge in Johnston, Iowa. He is also a trustee of the State Historical Society of Iowa and co-chair of the Iowa Battle Flags Preservation Committee. This article developed from a paper delivered earlier at the Northern Great Plains History Conference. In 2003 his article "The Fighting 51st Iowa in the Philippines" appeared in this magazine.

#### NOTE ON SOURCES

Piecing together the real estate activities of Henry Anson involved research in land records and abstracts; censuses; atlases; city and county directories and histories; and other recorders' and auditor's records. The c. 1890 biography of Anson appears in the "Old Settler's Record Book" (original at State Historical Society of Iowa [Iowa City], photocopy at the Historical Society of Marshall County which also holds Anson's will and death certificate). Also helpful was the Historical Society of Marshall County museum exhibit, "Marshalltown the Modern City, 1870–1900" (1996). The statement that land speculation in Iowa exceeded that of any other state appears in Paul W. Gates, "Land Policy and Tenancy in the Prairie States," *Journal of Economic History* (July 1941). See also Lewis Ahterton, *Main Street on the Middle Border* (Bloomington/Indiana University Press, 1984); Ray Allen Billington, *America's Frontier Heritage* (Abuquerque University of New Mexico Press, 1986); Benjamin F. Gue, *History of Iowa*, vol. 1 (New York: Century/History Company, 1903); Roscoe Loken, *Iowa Public Land Disposal* (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1942); Maureen Ogle, "Redefining Public Water Supplies, 1870–1900: A Study of Three Iowa Cities," *Annals of Iowa* (Spring 1990) and "Efficiency and System in Municipal Services: Fire Departments in Iowa, 1870–1900," *Annals of Iowa* (Spring 1991); Earle D. Ross, *Iowa Agriculture* (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1951); Leiland Sage, *A History of Iowa* (Ames/Iowa State University Press, 1974); Robert P. Swierenga, "Land Speculator-Profit: Reconsidered Central Iowa as a Test Case," *Journal of Economic History* (March 1966), and *Pioneers and Profits: Land Speculation on the Iowa Frontier* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1968). The quotation "nowhere somewhere" appears in Keith Wheeler, *The Iowansmen* (Alexandria: Time Life Books, 1975). The courthouse square transfer occurred June 21, 1881. Anson was paid \$2,000.00 before Aug. 22, 1881, warrant no. 1341. "Deed conveying Pub. Square." The origin of the "donation" myth begins with Anson's Dec. 1, 1905, *Times-Republican* obituary: "Mr. Anson's largest gift... was the solid block in the center of the city known as the court house square." Anson's autobiographical account in the 1890 "Old Settler's Record Book" did not claim to have donated any land for any courthouse. The Anson biography in Gue's *Biographies and Portraits of the Progressive Men of Iowa* (1899) says that Anson "contributed" the courthouse block. Land records in the county courthouse and title abstract indicate that Anson was paid for the ground known as the public square. In fact, Anson was paid \$325.00 for the land where the first courthouse was built. The myth has been perpetuated by later researchers who relied upon the obituary as fact and republished it in subsequent community histories without examining the original land records. Annotations to this article are held in the Iowa Heritage Illustrated production files (SHS-Iowa City).