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From Emancipation to Equality

Alexander Clark's Stand for Civil Rights in Iowa

by Stephen Frese

Alexander Clark was the son of emancipated slaves. Born in Pennsylvania in 1826, Clark moved to Cincinnati at age 13 to live with an uncle who taught him the barbering trade and sent him to grammar school, where he "got a fair smattering of the common branches of education." In October 1841, Clark boarded the steamer *George Washington* and, as a bartender, headed south on the Ohio River. The following May he traveled north on the Mississippi and landed in Muscatine, Iowa, where he would live for the next 42 years working as a barber, entrepreneur, orator, lawyer, newspaper editor—and an unyielding voice for civil rights.

Clark came to Iowa at a time when "colored people" were considered unfit to vote, hold elected office, or attend public schools. Recognizing the chasm between freedom and equality, Clark battled to overturn Iowa's discriminatory laws and desegregate public schools. He also fought against the intangible obstacles to full equality: fear, hatred, apathy, prejudice, stereotypes, and the pervasive idea of white supremacy. Living by example, Clark worked toward "the time when a man will be esteemed at his true worth without regard to circumstances or race or birth."

Iowa's territorial government had banned slavery in 1838, but being against slavery did not mean whites in Iowa believed all races were equal. Some Iowans opposed slavery on moral and religious grounds but "viewed African Americans as inferior to whites and believed that the two races should be kept apart," writes

historian Dorothy Schwieder. Many white southerners who settled in Iowa opposed slavery in the territory because it represented an economic evil. Coming north to escape a plantation system that favored wealthy men, "they were far from ready to share with the Negro the rights and privileges they expected to enjoy on the new frontier," historian Leola Bergmann notes. Early political leaders viewed slave ownership as a status symbol and ignored laws that prohibited slavery in Iowa. John Chambers, the second territorial governor, arrived from Kentucky in 1841 "accompanied, wrote an eyewitness, by 'a small troop' of slaves," writes historian Robert Dykstra.

Fearing that Iowa could become a dumping ground for manumitted southern slaves, legislators drafted what became known as Iowa's Black Codes to keep free blacks out. Laws enacted in 1839 required blacks to produce a certificate of freedom and post a \$500 bond. Black males were not allowed to vote, join the territorial militia, or serve in the legislature. Blacks could not serve as witnesses against white defendants in court cases, were not eligible for statutory relief, and could not attend public schools. In 1840, the legislature banned interracial marriages.

Delegates to Iowa's constitutional convention in 1844 formed a committee to deal with "a petition . . . for the admission of people of color on the same footing as white citizens." They also considered a provision that would prohibit blacks from settling in Iowa. The committee agreed in theory "that all men are created equal,

and are endowed by their Creator with equal unalienable rights, and that these rights are as sacred to the black man as the white man." However, they viewed equality as an abstract proposition, arguing that government is a man-made association that "changes or modifies . . . his natural rights. Some are surrendered, some are modified."

Fewer than 100 blacks lived in Iowa in 1844 (compared to 30,000 whites), but convention delegates feared what could happen if they allowed unrestricted black emigration. Iowa, they concluded, "can never consent to open the doors of our beautiful State and invite [negroes] to settle our lands. The policy of other States would drive the whole black population of the Union upon us."

When Alexander Clark opened his barbershop in Muscatine in 1842, Iowa was "one of the most racist territories in the North," according to Dykstra. Clark, however, saw Iowa as a land of opportunity. He bought timberland along the river bottom and negotiated contracts to provide wood for the lucrative steamboat market. At a time when most blacks in Iowa took menial, low-paying jobs, Clark challenged the status quo.

In his twenties, Clark married Catherine Griffin of Iowa City, a woman whose father came from Africa and whose mother was an American Indian, and started a family. He invested in real estate, helped organize Muscatine's African Methodist Episcopal Church, and launched his campaign for civil rights.

Clark attended the 1853 National Colored Convention in Rochester, New York, an assembly Frederick Douglass also attended and called "the largest and most enlightened colored convention that . . . ever assembled in this country." Because disenfranchised blacks were excluded from the political process, they met in conventions to debate issues, consider their options, and assert their rights as American citizens. The delegates believed slavery and discrimination could not be tolerated in a nation founded on principles of democracy and freedom. Clark brought the fight for equality to Iowa, initiating a petition campaign in 1855 to overturn an exclusionary law that prohibited "the immigration of free negroes into this state." Clark probably knew that the law was not enforced, but saw overturning it as a place to start in taking a public stand for civil rights in Iowa.

In December 1856 Clark gathered 122 signatures from blacks and whites on a petition to repeal Iowa's Black Laws, and in the next month he was one of 33 delegates to a black convention held in Muscatine. Delegates demanded full citizenship, agreeing that education was essential to "the moral and political

elevation of the colored race," as the minutes state. Black suffrage emerged as a primary issue of Iowa's 1857 constitutional convention. Voters rejected black suffrage, but Clark did not abandon the fight.

Once the Civil War had begun, Clark asked Governor Samuel Kirkwood for permission to recruit a company of black volunteers but, as Dykstra writes, he was "admonished (by Kirkwood's secretary) that white troops would not tolerate a racially integrated army." Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 changed everything. Clark recruited 1,153 blacks for the 1st Iowa Volunteers of African Descent (later designated the 60th Regiment Infantry, United States Colored Troops) and was chosen as the regiment's sergeant-major. A physical disability kept Alexander Clark from battle, but according to writer Marilyn Jackson, he was "one of the most active agents in the 'west' gathering recruits for the army and furthering the Union cause."

Following the war, people of African descent were no longer defined by their status as slaves. According to historian Leslie Schwalm, "Even in the Midwest, whites and African-Americans alike understood that this moment put everyone's rights and privileges, as well as black subordination and white supremacy, in question." Black soldiers had fought and died alongside whites in defense of the Union, and Clark knew the time was right to fight for suffrage. On October 31, 1865, 700 members of the 60th U.S. Infantry Colored Regiment met at Camp McClellan in Davenport, electing Clark president of the convention. "Now, my friends, we have a work to perform," he stated, "a duty we owe to ourselves and to our race, in asking for those political rights of which we are now deprived." Suffrage, he believed, was key to full participation in a free society. "We have discharged our duty as soldiers in the defense of our country, [and] respectfully urge that it is the duty of Iowa to allow us the use of our votes at the polls. . . . He who is worthy to be trusted with the musket can and ought to be trusted with the ballot."

The convention drafted a petition that Clark delivered to the capitol during Iowa's next General Assembly asking legislators to strike the word "white" from constitutional requirements for voting. The document also admonished blacks to pursue "education, industry, and thrift that would certainly be rewarded with increasing intelligence and wealth," while cautioning blacks "to abstain from the use of intoxicating drink." Blacks fighting for civil rights in Iowa also fought against the stereotype that they were "lazy and good-for-nothing." With the petition, Clark delivered an ad-

dress to all Iowans: "Fellow Countrymen: We wish we could truthfully address you as 'fellow citizens.' . . . We appeal to the justice of the people and of the Legislature of our State, for those rights of citizenship without which our well-earned freedom is but a shadow; . . . [give] to us that right without which we have no power to defend ourselves from unjust legislation, and no voice in the Government we have endeavored to preserve. . . . If we do not get our rights as citizens and voters it is not because we do not deserve and have not fairly earned them, but only because prejudice and wrong still triumph over Truth and Righteousness."

Clark returned to Muscatine believing his trip was not in vain. "I secured the presentation of the petition of the regiment, containing 700 names, together with a petition from the colored citizens of Muscatine numbering 97 names, and one from the white citizens numbering 235, making in all over one thousand names praying for universal suffrage."

Clark's campaign for suffrage continued at the Iowa State Colored Convention in Des Moines in February 1868. Delegates elected him secretary and spokesman of an assembly that believed the "tendency toward an enlarged freedom . . . impresses us with the firm conviction that our claims to universal suffrage and impartial justice at home and abroad will soon be secured to all."

Iowa Republicans responded with a platform provision to enfranchise black males, "simply because it was the right and moral position," in Schwieder's words. Democrats firmly opposed black suffrage. A referendum to strike the word "white" in the voting clause of Iowa's constitution came before voters in 1868. The amendment passed, turning Iowa—a state with some of the strictest Black Codes in the North—into "one of the most egalitarian states in the Union," says Dykstra. Clark's unyielding stand for equality helped Iowa become the first state beyond New England to give black males the right to vote. Minnesota soon followed, and those victories began the push for the 15th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

For Alexander Clark, "experience was his schoolmaster . . . and the world his college." He wanted something better for his—and all—children. In Iowa, an 1847 law mandated that "schools would be open and free alike to all white persons in the school district, between the ages of five and twenty-one years." Barriers to education kept blacks illiterate, reinforcing stereotypes about black intelligence.

In 1858, the General Assembly required that school

boards provide separate schools for black students. Muscatine operated a colored school, but Clark was not satisfied with the quality of education it provided. In fact, his daughters, Rebecca and Susan, were educated at home with occasional attendance in Muscatine's black schools. Ready to publicly challenge segregation, Clark sent 12-year-old Susan to a neighborhood white school in September 1867. She was denied admission. In a letter to the *Muscatine Journal* Clark stated, "My personal object is that my children attend where they can receive the largest and best advantages of learning." He outlined contrasts between Muscatine's white and colored schools. White schools were conveniently located, but the black school was "nearly a mile from many of the small colored children, keeping more than a third of them from school." White schools had adequate supplies and competent, well-paid teachers. The black school did not. The white schools, Clark wrote, "have prepared and qualified pupils by the hundred for the high school; the colored school has never prepared or qualified one that could pass an examination for any class in the high school."

Clark filed a lawsuit in the Muscatine County District Court. The judge issued a writ of mandamus compelling the board of directors to allow Susan to attend the all-white Grammar School No. 2. The board appealed to the Iowa Supreme Court, asserting its right to require colored children in Muscatine to attend the separate school provided. The Supreme Court in 1868 disagreed.

In rendering the majority opinion, Justice J. Cole pointed out that the 1857 state constitution had created a state board of education that was required to "provide for the education of *all the youths of the State*, through a system of common schools." Requiring black students to attend a separate school violated the law which "expressly gives the same rights to *all the youths*."

The justice continued, "The term 'colored race' is . . . a synonym for African. If the board of directors are clothed with a discretion to exclude African children from our common schools, and require them to attend . . . a school composed wholly of children of that nationality, they would have the same power and right to exclude German, . . . Irish, French, English and other nationalities, which together constitute the *American*. . . . The board cannot . . . deny a youth admission to any particular school because of his or her nationality, religion, color, clothing or the like."

Within six years of the Iowa Supreme Court's landmark decision, all Iowa schools were open to all children regardless of race, nationality, or religion. Susan Clark appeared on the list of Muscatine High School

graduates in 1871; her brother, Alexander Jr., followed. Alexander Jr. became the first black graduate of the University of Iowa's law school. At the age of 58, Alexander Sr. became the second.

In the years immediately following the Civil War, newspapers still covered events in the black community, but the emotions that ran high during the Civil War had diminished and "the special interest and the ready sympathy of earlier days waned," Bergmann explains. "As the Negro population increased, the number of newspaper items devoted to their affairs decreased." Soon the only black news reported in "white" papers focused on crime. This lack of positive coverage led to the formation of "black" newspapers, which carried stories that white papers refused to print.

Clark turned to the black press as a medium to convey his opinions in the ongoing struggle for equality. In July 1882, Clark bought the *Chicago Conservator*, the city's first black paper. Two years later he became the editor and, in writer Marilyn Jackson's words, "wielded a fearless pen . . . dipped in acid." He spoke out against prejudice and discrimination, "wheeling the paper into the ranks of a true radical Republican paper."

Many white Americans thought the solution to "the Negro problem" after emancipation was to send blacks back to Africa. Liberia was established in 1822 as a colony for freed U.S. slaves. Clark opposed colonization: "We are Americans by birth and we assure you that we are Americans in feeling, in spite of all the wrongs which we . . . endured in this our native country." However, when President Benjamin Harrison appointed Clark as the U.S. minister to Liberia in 1890, he accepted the position because it was the highest presidential appointment ever offered to a black man. He died in Liberia in 1891.

Alexander Clark hoped his life would inspire young people, especially blacks, to set worthwhile goals and achieve them in spite of obstacles. By example he discredited the prejudicial and racist attitudes that permeated white society, becoming a "symbol of a growing, prosperous and more assertive black community, not only in the state, but nationwide," writes journalist Stephen Byrd.

Clark battled against exclusionary laws. He fought to repeal Iowa's Black Codes. And he won. He fought for integrated schools, asserting that separate does not mean equal—a conclusion the United States Supreme Court agreed with almost a century later.

Clark's ambition was "tempered by sound judg-

ment," a Muscatine minister eulogized. Discerning when to take a stand contributed to his success. He demonstrated his political genius by acting when the climate was right to force change, becoming a catalyst in efforts to extend the American idea of democracy to all people.

Despite Clark's many victories, racial discrimination "would continue to plague various aspects of African-American Iowans' lives into the next century," writes historian Kathryn Neal. Although his accomplishments did not eliminate social and economic injustices, he established legal precedents and a solid foundation upon which later generations could build. ❖

Stephen Frese won the 2006 National History Day competition with this essay and was awarded a four-year scholarship to Case Western Reserve University.

NOTE ON SOURCES

Author's note: Throughout my research I encountered terms including Negro, colored people, blacks, and mulattoes used to refer to people of African descent. Alexander Clark is an example of how difficult it can be to classify a person's race. Three of his great-grandparents were white. His father was the son of a mulatto slave and her Irish master. In 1948 Clark married Catherine Griffin of Iowa City, a woman whose father came from Africa and whose mother was an American Indian.

Among the many sources used are these: "Alexander Clark, Muscatine," *The United States Biographical Dictionary . . . Iowa Volume* (Chicago: American Biographical Publishing Company, 1878); G. Galin Berrier, "The Negro Suffrage Issue in Iowa—1865–1868," *Annals of Iowa* (Spring 1968); Leola Nelson Bergmann, *The Negro in Iowa* (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1969); Eugene H. Berwanger, *The Frontier Against Slavery* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1967); Stephen Byrd, "Seminar Takes Audience on a Journey through Iowa's Black History," *Muscatine Journal*, 2-23-2004; *Clark v. The Board of Directors, etc.* 14 April 1868, 24 Iowa 266; Arnie Cooper, "A Stony Road: Black Education in Iowa, 1838–1860," *Annals of Iowa* (Winter/Spring 1986); Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (Hartford, Conn.: Park Publishing Co., 1881); several works by Robert Dykstra, including "Dr. Emerson's Sam: Black Iowans before the Civil War," *Palimpsest* (May/June 1982), "White Men, Black Laws: Territorial Iowans and Civil Rights, 1838–1843," *Annals of Iowa* (Fall 1982), *Bright Radical Star: Black Freedom and White Supremacy on the Hawkeye Frontier* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), and "The Issue Squarely Met: Toward an Explanation of Iowans' Racial Attitudes, 1865–1868," *Annals of Iowa* (Summer, 1984); *History of Muscatine County* (Chicago: Western Historical Company, 1897); *Iowa House Journal* 1850, p. 145; Marilyn Jackson, "Alexander Clark: A Rediscovered Black Leader," *Iowan* (Spring 1975); Rev. J. W. Laws, *Oration on the Life of Hon. Alexander Clark* (Keokuk: n.p., n.d.); Kathryn M. Neal, "Unsung Heroines," in *Outside In: African-American History in Iowa, 1838–2000*, ed. Bill Silag (Des Moines: State Historical Society of Iowa, 2001); *The Phylaxis* (March 1975), p. 65; *Proceedings of the Iowa State Colored Convention . . . February 12th and 13th, 1868* (Muscatine: Daily Journal Book and Job Printing House, 1868); Leslie A. Schwalm, "History Remembered: Scholar Recounts the North's Own Conflicts Over Emancipation and Black Migration," *Arts & Sciences* (Fall 2002); Dorothy Schwieder, *Iowa: The Middle Land* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1996); Benjamin F. Shambaugh, *The Constitutions of Iowa* (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1934); "The Statute Laws of the Territory of Iowa, . . . Burlington A.D. 1838–39," *Annals of Iowa* (April 1897); and the *Cleveland Gazette*, *Muscatine Journal*, and *Daily State Register*.

Annotations are held in the *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* production files, SHSI (Iowa City).