

## THE HALF-BREED TRACT

In the summer of 1824 occurred an event of significance in the history of the Iowa wilderness before its occupation by the pioneers. Ten chiefs of the Sac and Fox Indians left their village homes upon the banks of the Mississippi River and made a long business journey eastward to the national capital to see their "Great Father", the President of the United States. For the sake of perpetuating peace and friendship with the government this deputation of head men on the 4th of August relinquished the claims of their tribes to land within the limits of the new State of Missouri, with the understanding "that the small tract of land lying between the rivers Desmoin and the Mississippi, and the section of the above line [the northern boundary of Missouri projected eastward] between the Mississippi and the Desmoin, is intended for the use of the half-breeds belonging to the Sock and Fox nations".

### WITNESSES TO THE SAC AND FOX TREATY OF 1824

Among the men who accompanied the chiefs to Washington and witnessed the signing of this treaty were such well-known westerners as A. Baronet Vasquez, Maurice Blondeau, Louis Tesson (nicknamed Honoré), and John W. Johnson. Vasquez, a trader licensed by the government to operate among the Sacs and Foxes at this time, acted as interpreter during the treaty negotiations. He had served the United States as ensign at old Fort Madison before its evacuation and destruction in September, 1813. Maurice Blondeau, a Fox half-breed, had long maintained an establishment of some sort within the boundaries of the new

reservation. By this treaty the government indemnified him to the extent of \$500 for property taken from him during the War of 1812. Tesson had probably spent most of his life upon the Spanish land grant made to his father in 1799. Johnson had served as agent for the sale of government goods at old Fort Madison and later at Prairie du Chien.<sup>1</sup> In fact all these individuals, as inhabitants or previous residents, were familiar with the country embraced in the triangular tract which was now established for the half-breeds and they were intimately acquainted with all the Sac and Fox villagers, including those of the small Sac village on the reservation itself.

#### AUTHORSHIP OF THE TREATY

The treaty ostensibly effected for the benefit of the Sac and Fox half-breeds was ratified by the United States Senate on the 18th of January, 1825.<sup>2</sup> No one has yet been able to ascertain the number of half-breeds for whom the government made such generous provision. They probably did not exceed fifty persons in all. If the facts were known, it might be asserted that the white fathers of the half-breeds were the ones chiefly interested and instrumental in persuading the government to establish the new reservation. Indeed, at his home in St. Louis, John W. Johnson, the most influential of the men above mentioned, had a family of three daughters by an Indian mother. Other half-breeds no doubt dwelt in the villages of the tribesmen, many perhaps upon the tract itself which had been more or less frequented by the whites for a generation and more.

<sup>1</sup> For numerous references to these men the reader should consult the indexes to Volumes XI and XII of THE IOWA JOURNAL OF HISTORY AND POLITICS; also Vol. XIII, pp. 14, 17, 32.

<sup>2</sup> As to the authorship of this treaty and the legal difficulties arising out of the Half-breed Tract, see Mr. Karl Knoepfler's unpublished monograph in the possession of The State Historical Society of Iowa. For the terms of the treaty, see Kappler's *Indian Affairs*, Vol. II, pp. 207, 208.

During the French and the Spanish régimes in the Iowa wilderness fur traders resorted to this region, especially French Canadians, and they must have mingled quite freely with the natives, as has always been the case where two races come into contact. American troops and traders, John W. Johnson among them, took up their residence at Fort Madison in 1808 and remained for five years.

## EVENTS IN THE EARLY HISTORY OF SOUTHEASTERN IOWA

Nothing definite is known of the events which took place in southeastern Iowa immediately after the War of 1812. Tradition has it that the first log cabin upon the present site of Keokuk was built in 1820 by Dr. Samuel C. Muir, a graduate of Edinburgh University. He is said to have married a young Sac woman who saved his life while engaged in the Indian trade, and it was while he himself was performing the duties of surgeon at Fort Edwards just across the Mississippi in Illinois that he constructed the cabin for the accommodation of his Indian wife and five children. Muir seems to have lived at the Illinois lead mines for some time: indeed, in 1819, he was there selling merchandise furnished by George Davenport of Rock Island. One year later, in August, 1820, the explorer, Schoolcraft, found him trading goods for lead on an island opposite the old mines of Julien Dubuque. Tradition also tells us that when officers and attachés of the United States army were ordered to break off their relations with Indian women, Muir resigned his post at Fort Edwards and after leasing his log cabin to Otis Reynolds and John Culver practised medicine for several years in northern Missouri and later at the Galena mines. Certain it is that Muir traded with the Sac and Fox Indians for at least four years after 1820.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> A tangled mass of traditions has been woven around the name of Muir in the *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, Vol. II, pp. 212, 224, Vol. X, pp. 491, 492,

Another record of life in this region before it was set apart as the Half-breed Tract is that of Isaac R. Campbell. He visited the Iowa country along the Des Moines rapids of the Mississippi. Six miles above Muir's log cabin he came upon the post of a French trader, Lemoliese, and one mile farther north he found Blondeau's establishment. At the head of the rapids, on the site of the present town of Montrose, stood the village of Chief Cut Nose, near the remains of what were probably Tesson's house and apple orchard. During the years 1821-1825 Campbell frequently visited this region with ox-team and wagon, and finally settled down at the head of the rapids in Illinois. There his father-in-law, James White, kept several keel-boats for freighting cargoes between St. Louis and such points as the lead mines and Prairie du Chien. Owing to shallow, rocky rapids in the channel steamboat transportation on the Upper Mississippi was a difficult problem and cargoes generally had to be unloaded and hauled around the rapids by land, especially upon the Iowa shore.<sup>4</sup>

"Puck-e-she-tuk", "The Point", or "Foot of the Rapids", as it was then variously called, during the decade

and Vol. XIII, p. 287; *Iowa Historical Record*, Vol. XVI, p. 100; *Annals of Iowa*, Vol. V, p. 889; and *The History of Lee County, Iowa* (1879), pp. 167, 889. According to the *Annals of Iowa* (Third Series), Vol. X, p. 364, Muir was born in the District of Columbia, and was dropped from the army in July, 1819. See also THE IOWA JOURNAL OF HISTORY AND POLITICS, Vol. XII, pp. 532, 534, 536, Vol. XIII, p. 32.

<sup>4</sup> *The History of Lee County, Iowa* (1879), p. 333; *Annals of Iowa*, Vol. V, pp. 883-888. It is stated on doubtful authority that the "Zebulon M. Pike" ascended the lower or Des Moines Rapids of the Mississippi in 1817.—*Annals of Iowa*, Vol. V, p. 887. Regular steamboat traffic on the Upper Mississippi seems to have begun early in the spring of 1822. The year previous many whites had commenced lead-mining operations upon the Galena River, and in the immense trade which then opened between the mines and St. Louis there were employed a large number of keel-boats and six steamboats. The first steamboat to go as far north as Fort Snelling was the "Virginia" in 1823. See *Proceedings of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin*, 1911, p. 107; THE IOWA JOURNAL OF HISTORY AND POLITICS, Vol. XII, p. 539, and Vol. XIII, p. 35.

after Muir is said to have built the first cabin, became the home of many white men. If Reynolds and Culver lived upon the spot after 1820 as stated above, there is no record of what they did. Moses Stillwell with his wife, four children, and a brother-in-law named Vanorsdoll came early in 1828 as their agents and representatives. They cut wood and sold it to passing steamboats and carried on trade with the Indians. Then, sometime before 1830 the American Fur Company set up a row of hewed log houses for the Indian trade. As manager, Russell Farnham was assisted by three clerks, two interpreters, and four men, among them John Connolly and John Forsyth, who served as itinerant pedlers and collectors of furs. These men, it is said, all had Indian wives and gained much popularity as drummers in the various Indian villages. Several men with French names were also connected with the American Fur Company's operations at this place.<sup>5</sup>

CALEB ATWATER'S VISIT TO KEOKUK AND THE HALF-BREED TRACT IN 1829

In the year 1829 President Andrew Jackson commissioned General M'Niel, Pierre Menard, and Caleb Atwater to treat with the Indians for the transfer of their mineral lands in Illinois and Wisconsin. As an incident of his steamboat journey from Circleville, Ohio, to Prairie du Chien and thence to Washington, D. C., Atwater has left an account of his experiences upon the Half-breed Tract. On the morning of July 4th, 1829, amid the booming of cannon, men and women bound for Galena or Prairie du Chien disembarked at "Keeokuk",<sup>6</sup> capital of the Half-breed Tract, a

<sup>5</sup> *Annals of Iowa*, Vol. V, p. 890; and *The History of Lee County, Iowa* (1879), pp. 167, 333, 334, 335. These two sources differ as to important details. Such reminiscences, however, are the only materials on the early history of southeastern Iowa which the writer has been able to discover.

<sup>6</sup> Isaac R. Campbell is authority for the statement that the name Keokuk was given to the place at the suggestion of a few steamboat men in 1835.

village containing about twenty Indian families, an American Fur Company store, and a tavern. The half-breed reservation of timber and prairie land was then declared to be owned in common by about forty-two persons, only a few of whom had actually made clearings or settlements. On the opposite shore three miles below could be seen the white-painted buildings of Fort Edwards upon a high bluff, and from there northward the Illinois shore for many miles above the rapids was dotted with log houses and farms at half-mile intervals.

After arranging for the conveyance of the government's goods over the rapids Atwater made his way on foot for a distance of twelve miles north of "Keeokuk". He saw the commission's provisions upon the beach exposed to the hot sun. He called upon Maurice Blondeau then ill and "lying under a shade, out of doors". His Indian family were said to be "owners to a considerable extent of this fine tract of land", the daughters being "well educated, well read, and accomplished young ladies." Atwater further declared Blondeau's farm "a fine fertile one, and his dwelling house is on the bank of the river, within a few rods of the water's edge. His corn is on the side hill, covered a great space, and looked finely. Here I ate as good a dinner as any one ever did, of venison just killed, and of fish just caught as I arrived here."

Highly gratified with such a hearty reception Atwater pursued his twelve-mile walk to an island at the head of the rapids. On the site of Montrose, he and John W. Johnson visited the Sac village of forty or fifty persons and secured the chief's promise of aid in the coming treaty negotiations. After seven days' work in getting the cargo over the rapids all passengers boarded the "Red Rover" and steamed

Isaac Galland declares that George Davenport proposed the name at a meeting which was held upon the steamboat to prepare for the Fourth of July celebration in 1829.

northward. Atwater's picture of the Iowa wilderness farther on is one of the few descriptions of the country before its occupation by the pioneers within the next five years.<sup>7</sup>

## INTRUSION OF WHITES UPON THE HALF-BREED TRACT

Isaac Galland and his wife took up their abode in the Half-breed Tract and founded Nashville (now known as Galland), convinced that this spot was destined to become a great commercial center. Here in 1830, it is said, was born to them a daughter, the first white child of the Iowa country. In the same year Isaac Campbell brought his family from Illinois to help swell the population of Nashville, persuaded by the promoter of its future growth and prosperity.<sup>8</sup> There must have been other accessions to the squatter

<sup>7</sup> Atwater's *Remarks Made on a Tour to Prairie du Chien*, pp. 57-61, 63, 64, 73, contains the material on which this account is based. Maurice Blondeau died in the month of August, 1829, probably of the illness which Atwater noted in July. His farm fell to a brother-in-law named Andrew St. Amont, who had been a licensed trader among the Sacs and Foxes in the years 1824 and 1825.—THE IOWA JOURNAL OF HISTORY AND POLITICS, Vol. XII, pp. 539, 545; *Annals of Iowa*, Vol. VII, p. 266.

Describing the Iowa country Atwater wrote:

"About thirty five miles below Rock island, the beautiful country on the west side of the river opened to view, and from the first moment we saw it, all eyes were turned towards it. At every turn of the river, as we moved along, new bursts of wonder and admiration were poured out by all the passengers. The ladies were enraptured at the numerous and beautiful situations for dwelling houses, where they wished one day to live, in rural bliss. . . . Nature had done all—man nothing—and not a human being was seen upon either shore, nor a human habitation. That such a beautiful country, was intended by its Author to be forever in the possession and occupancy of serpents, wild fowls, wild beasts and savages, who derive little benefit from it, no reasonable man, can for one moment believe who sees it. . . . Princes might dwell here . . . . fronting the Mississippi and along it, and possess handsomer seats than any of them can boast of in the old world. We could hardly persuade ourselves, many times, when we first saw any one of these beautiful spots, that all the art that man possessed, and wealth could employ, had not been used to fit the place, for some gentleman's country seat; and every moment, as we passed along one expected to see some princely mansion, erected on the rising ground."

<sup>8</sup> *Annals of Iowa*, Vol. V, pp. 887, 888.

population of the new village, for the number of children soon warranted the organization of a school under Berryman Jennings, who is now generally recognized as the first school teacher in the Iowa country.<sup>9</sup> All these settlers were, of course, trespassers upon lands which the government had set aside for the use of the half-breed Sacs and Foxes.

In the years 1829 and 1830 the Sac and Fox Indians petitioned the President to order a survey and division of the reservation for the half-breeds living at the time of the treaty of 1824. They also asked their "Father" to remove all whites who had settled on these lands "except a father, a husband, or wife of any of the half-breeds" or any agent or trader licensed by the President, and they expressed a wish to see the sale of all spirituous liquors forbidden on the tract.<sup>10</sup>

#### A GLIMPSE OF FRONTIER LIFE IN THE EARLY THIRTIES

Dr. Muir, having returned to Keokuk with his family in the autumn of 1830, was joined in the following year by Isaac Campbell. As partners these men were no mean contenders with the American Fur Company for the Indian trade of the region.<sup>11</sup> A very interesting glimpse of frontier community life came from the pen of a foreign-born Frenchman, Charles Larpenteur. He had just come to the West from Baltimore in company with John W. Johnson, who was then conducting a party of slaves to Missouri. On his way to Prairie du Chien by the steamboat "Red Rover" in 1831 he formed the acquaintance of Maurice Blondeau, who took such a great fancy to him that nothing would do but he must go along to Blondeau's farm, seven miles north

<sup>9</sup> *Iowa Normal Monthly*, Vol. XII, pp. 268-271.

<sup>10</sup> See Knoepfler's manuscript on the Half-breed Tract; *Annals of Iowa* (Third Series), Vol. X, pp. 454, 455.

<sup>11</sup> *Annals of Iowa*, Vol. V, pp. 888, 889, 893.



of Keokuk. To quote his own words about a sojourn there of two months:<sup>12</sup>

I consented, got a horse calop, and we started. The improvements consisted of a comfortable log cabin, and Blondo was indeed well fixed for the country at the time. After some little time he took me into the village and introduced me to several of the leading men, of whom a great many were drunk, and toward evening he got so drunk himself that he frequently asked me if I did not want to "smell powder", but as I never felt like smelling powder as he proposed, I declined, not knowing why he used the expression. After the spree the old gentleman was very kind, took me all over the halfbreed reservation — as fine country as I ever saw — and finally remarked that he would give me all the land I wanted if I should happen to make a match with his niece, Louise Dauphin. That was said after I had given up the idea of going on to Prairie du Chien, where I was bound; but, thinking myself too young, I declined all overtures, although I confess that I came very near accepting the offer, for Louise was one of the handsomest girls I ever saw — it cost me many long sighs to leave her, and more afterward.

Early in the year 1832 Muir<sup>13</sup> died of the cholera and about the same time the American Fur Company left the field for better hunting-grounds, so that Isaac Campbell became "the successor, owner and occupant of their buildings, . . . supplying Indians, Half Breeds and whites with all the necessaries of life", besides furnishing entertainment for travelers and towing goods around the rapids for steamboats. During the summer of 1832 about twelve families were domiciled at Keokuk, Campbell and some thirty-four employees comprising most of the male population. Village life on the Half-breed Tract was nothing if not sociable: card-playing, dances, horse-racing, and

<sup>12</sup> Coues's *Forty Years a Fur Trader on the Upper Missouri*, pp. 4-6. Larpenteur writes that the two stores at Keokuk then belonged to Stillwell and Davenport.

<sup>13</sup> A writer in the *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, Vol. II, p. 224, said of him: "Like most persons connected with the army he was too fond of liquor, otherwise he might have risen to distinction and usefulness."

boxing matches afforded the mixed population their chief amusements. In the absence of criminal jurisprudence and punishments to fit the crime the worst penalty imposed for wrong-doing is said to have been temporarily depriving a person of his right to drink liquor.<sup>14</sup>

MEMORIAL OF MISSOURI CITIZENS RELATIVE TO THE HALF-BREED TRACT

The State legislators of Missouri, voicing the sentiments of their constituents, adopted a memorial to Congress declaring that the Half-breed Tract had ceased to be Indian land, was then held by the United States for the use of individuals only, "some of whom have been reared among us, and are as civilized and as well instructed as any of our citizens", and that therefore it should be annexed to the State of Missouri. Though Congress paid no attention to their request it is interesting to note that the memorialists insisted that the Tract was a wedge in a corner of their State, "disfiguring the form, and destroying the compactness of our territory", adding in conclusion:

It borders upon the Mississippi for the greater part, perhaps the whole extent of the lower rapids of that river, and thus embraces a spot, which, in future times, will be of immense importance to the commerce and intercourse of the whole western valley. Your memorialists anticipate the day when the obstructions to navigation will be overcome by a canal around those rapids; when the inexhaustible power of that mighty stream [will be applied] to almost every variety of manufacturing machinery, and when a commercial city, will spring up in that wilderness, to serve as the great entrepot of the Upper and Lower Mississippi.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> *Annals of Iowa*, Vol. V, pp. 890, 891; *The History of Lee County, Iowa* (1879), p. 335.

<sup>15</sup> *Senate Documents*, 2nd Session, 21st Congress, No. 71, p. 4. These words of the legislators of Missouri are prophetic of what has actually come to pass: the United States government in 1868 constructed a ship canal, free to all boats, around the rapids. Within recent years the Keokuk and Hamilton Power Company has dispensed with the necessity of a canal by constructing just opposite the city of Keokuk one of the largest river dams in the world.

## REQUESTS FOR THE SURVEY AND DIVISION OF THE HALF-BREED TRACT

In the month of October, 1831, John W. Johnson, whose daughters were among the tenants-in-common of the Half-breed Tract, advised Lewis Cass, Secretary of War, that although Congress had appropriated \$2,000 for a survey and division of the Tract, nothing had as yet been done. The claimants desired that the northern boundary be fixed and also asked that a town site be laid off where squatters were then in possession (Keokuk). Johnson suggested that each of the claimants, after being ascertained by three disinterested men, should receive his share of the land and town lots valued according to quality, quantity, and situation, each claimant to obtain an absolute title in the course of time. Furthermore, Johnson urged the propriety of having a school for about one hundred Indian and half-breed children.<sup>16</sup>

John Connolly also wrote a letter similar to Johnson's, begging leave to obtrude his opinions on behalf of the sixty or more persons on the roll of claims. Many of the latter, he alleged, were afraid to make improvements upon or cultivate the tract until a survey and division were made. Of the need of a town in this region he declared:

There is, at this point, Keokuck, the most eligible site for a town that the Mississippi affords north of St. Louis. In consequence of the uncertainty of the right of location among the claimants, where there ought to be a flourishing town, there is none; and the farmers and merchants north on Fever river and Illinois, in general, suffer by having their merchandise exposed on the shores for weeks, in times of low water. Many of the half-breeds, Sacs and Foxes, are of mature age, and some of good education; some have parents and guardians, and there are others have neither. . . . There can be no doubt but the survey and division of these lands would be a very popular measure in the adjacent States and Territories, as

<sup>16</sup> *Senate Documents*, 1st Session, 23d Congress, Vol. VIII, pp. 635, 636.

there are many men of capital and high standing who feel anxious to settle themselves on these rapids.<sup>17</sup>

Thomas Forsyth, who had just been removed from his post as Sac and Fox Indian agent at Rock Island, also wrote of discontent and dissatisfaction with the government's policy. He urged "the employment of a Catholic priest, to teach a school and instruct the half-breeds in religion; this would be pleasing to the Indians, and might, at no great distance of time, entice some of the Indians to embrace a civilized life." His reason for making this recommendation was that nine-tenths of the fathers of the half-breeds were French Catholics.<sup>18</sup>

#### FIRST LAND SURVEY IN THE IOWA COUNTRY

In January, 1832, William Clark appointed Jenifer T. Sprigg to survey the tract at \$5 per day and authorized him to buy horses, tent, camp equipage, and other necessaries, and employ chain-carriers, axe-men, and a flag-man. All the usual directions for doing the work were given.<sup>19</sup> Shortly afterward Clark received orders from Washington that a town plot should be laid off at the junction of the Des Moines and the Mississippi rivers, that the survey be pushed on, and that all half-breeds present their claims as rapidly as possible.<sup>20</sup>

Sprigg, with all the necessary provisions and three employees, shipped from St. Louis and arrived at Keokuk about the middle of March, 1832, while two other employees made the journey by horse and wagon. The surveyor set to work with the aid of two chain-carriers, an axe-man, and a

<sup>17</sup> *Senate Documents*, 1st Session, 23d Congress, Vol. VIII, p. 639.

<sup>18</sup> *Senate Documents*, 1st Session, 23d Congress, Vol. IX, pp. 21, 22. For answers to Johnson's and Forsyth's letters, see Vol. VIII, No. 512, p. 764.

<sup>19</sup> *Senate Documents*, 1st Session, 23d Congress, Vol. IX, pp. 242-248.

<sup>20</sup> *Senate Documents*, 1st Session, 23d Congress, Vol. VIII, p. 760, and Vol. IX, pp. 219, 220.

flag-man; while a hunter and camp-keeper prepared their meals. They projected the northern boundary of Missouri eastward, meandered streams in the Tract, and established section and township lines. Sprigg's men quit work when news of the Indian rising under Black Hawk was noised about, and they were discharged on June the 15th. Not until the following October did Sprigg resume operations and even then his men frequently deserted.

The town site of Keokuk, one mile square, was laid out at the foot of the rapids, and a similar area was surveyed at Montrose on the old Spanish land grant of Tesson.<sup>21</sup> Both of these sites were extremely advantageous and valuable because steamboats on voyages up and down the river had to unload their cargoes here in order to be lightered over the rapids. By the 12th of March, 1833, the Half-breed Tract had been surveyed, and plats and field-notes were forwarded to Washington, D. C. But as late as the following September no division of the reservation had been effected: John W. Johnson declared he could not account for this "remarkable" tardiness, and once more urged that each half-breed claimant be given title in fee simple to his share of the Tract which then amounted to about 120,000 acres.<sup>22</sup>

#### LATER HISTORY OF THE HALF-BREED LANDS

The later history of these lands, especially the story of the years of confusion and litigation over land titles, has already been fully told by another writer. The fact of special importance to be noted here is that, whereas trespassers upon government lands to the north were religious-

<sup>21</sup> *Senate Documents*, 1st Session, 23d Congress, Vol. X, pp. 557, 558. For a deposition relative to land titles growing out of this grant to Tesson, see below, pp. 238-249.

<sup>22</sup> *Senate Documents*, 1st Session, 23d Congress, Vol. X, p. 669. See also Knoepfler's unpublished monograph.

ly excluded and driven out by United States troops before the 1st of June, 1833, squatters upon the Half-breed Tract were never once molested, though half-breed claimants had frequently raised objections to their presence. So large were the accessions to the population of the Iowa country along the Mississippi after June the 1st, 1833, that United States army men at Fort Crawford and Fort Armstrong admitted the hopelessness of the task of preventing these unlawful intrusions upon the public domain. And so, although the occupation by the whites of southeastern Iowa began and continued in illegality, it nevertheless proved to be the first permanent settlement in the whole Iowa country.<sup>23</sup>

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THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA  
IOWA CITY IOWA

<sup>23</sup> Persons who squatted upon the tract just south of the site of old Fort Madison in 1832 are said to have been driven away by troops from Fort Armstrong.—*The History of Lee County, Iowa* (1879), p. 170; *Annals of Iowa*, Vol. V, p. 892.