

THOMAS McKNIGHT

"The Year of Decision", Bernard DeVoto calls 1846 in his unusual book of that name. That year the Mormons began their trek from the Mississippi Valley to "The Great American Desert", in what was later to become the State of Utah. James K. Polk got his Mexican War. The Northwest Boundary between the United States and Canada was established. John C. Fremont was acting the part of "America's Manifest Destiny" in California. And Iowa became a State, an event of supreme importance to many of us. In getting started as a State it was necessary to elect officers, including a Governor. In that expression of democracy in action one candidate had to be defeated; he thus became the first of the procession of "Forgotten Men" down the pathway of a hundred years, the men who ran for election as Governor of Iowa and failed to make the grade.

The Constitutional Convention of 1846 convened in Iowa City on May 4th and completed its work in the record time of fifteen days, adjourning on May 19th. Territorial Governor James Clarke called a special election for August third upon the question of its adoption or rejection by the voters. The Democrats favored adoption, but the Whigs generally opposed it, chiefly because of Article IX on Corporations, which prohibited the creation of banks or any corporations with the power of creating paper "to circulate as money". This Constitution was adopted by the narrow margin of 456 in a total vote of 18,528.¹ It pro-

¹ Benj. F. Shambaugh's *Documentary Material Relating to the History of Iowa*, Vol. I, p. 166; Benj. F. Shambaugh's *The Constitutions of Iowa*, p. 210.

vided in Article XIII that in case of its adoption Territorial Governor James Clarke should call a general election within three months of the date of adoption. State officers, two Representatives in Congress, and members of the General Assembly were to be chosen at this election. The Governor's proclamation set the twenty-sixth of October as the date and the democratic process began with the calling of nominating conventions by the two parties.²

The Democrats met in Iowa City on Thursday, September 24th, and the Whigs in the same place the following day. There was no great rush of candidates for State offices on either side, for the salaries provided by the new Constitution presented little to attract candidates. The delegates to the Constitutional Convention had been very economically minded when it came to this salary question. They provided that for the first ten years of statehood the Governor should be paid not more than \$1000 per annum; the lesser officers in amounts of \$400, \$500, or \$600; and the Judges of the Supreme Court, who were to be chosen by the General Assembly, \$1000 each.³

The first ballot taken in the Democratic convention resulted in sixty-two votes for Ansel Briggs of Jackson

² *The Burlington Hawkeye* for September 17, 1846, said: "We have nothing to conceal. It is well known that a large number of Whigs throughout the Territory were disinclined to hold a convention. Others were in favor of it, if for no other object than to meet in mere consultation for the purpose of promoting what they think the best interests of the Territory. The latter have called a meeting and although the notice is exceedingly brief as to time, and many may still think it inexpedient, we nevertheless hope that all the counties south of the Iowa will be represented. The interests of our new State demand that such a meeting should not be partial, but that all the Whigs should be represented. Let Henry, Des Moines, Louisa and all the other counties send delegates, whatever may be their views in regard to its expediency. The meeting shall take place at Iowa City on Friday of next week, the 25th inst." I am indebted to Miss Elsie Schinzel of the Free Public Library in Burlington for this and other quotations from *The Hawkeye*.

³ Benj. F. Shambaugh's *The Old Stone Capitol Remembers*, p. 348.

County, thirty-two for Jesse Williams of Jefferson County, and thirty-one for William Thompson of Henry County. Briggs lacked only one vote of a majority, and the nomination of the former Vermonter was made unanimous.⁴

Just how Briggs got his victorious backing in the convention is not very clear. Johnson Brigham in his history of Iowa says that Philip B. Bradley of Jackson County was the "Thurlow Weed of Governor Briggs' political campaign and gubernatorial career". Bradley was a member of the last Territorial Council and of the first State Senate, and later was secretary of the Senate. He was the Governor's chief adviser during the four years of Briggs' administration. According to a letter from the late Miss Marian Louise Bliss of Washta, another influential neighbor of Ansel Briggs was Nathaniel Butterworth. "These three friends were known as the three B's, Butterworth, Bradley, Briggs."

Briggs had served as a member of the House in the Fifth Legislative Assembly and later had been sheriff of Jackson County. He had attracted some attention by his firm and unqualified statements in opposition to banks of issue, one being frequently quoted—"No banks but earth—and those well tilled". The opposition tried to make capital of what they called Briggs' obscurity. The *Burlington Hawkeye* for October 1, 1846, pontificated:

It is said that if the steamer Gov. Briggs had never hove in sight of Belleview, the present nominee of the Polk convention would never have been thought of as a candidate for governor. A Jackson County member was reminded by having seen that boat that they

⁴ Ansel Briggs was born in Vermont in 1806. In 1830 he migrated west to Ohio where he married. There he engaged in the operation of a stage line. In 1836 he came to Iowa, stopping first in Davenport. Then he settled in the village of Andrew in Jackson County and resumed his business of stagecoaching. He also had mail contracts.—Edward H. Stiles's *Recollections and Sketches of Notable Lawyers and Public Men of Early Iowa*, p. 53; Franc B. Wilkie's *Davenport Past and Present*, p. 41.

had such a man in the county as Briggs, and he thought it would be capital to introduce him as a candidate. He was so introduced, and was nominated without any further questions being asked. If he is elected, he may thank that worthy talented and good Whig Gov. Briggs of Massachusetts, for his elevation; for if Gov. Briggs had never been what he now is, no boat would have ever been called by his name, and the man from Jackson would never have thought of Mr. Briggs of his county as a candidate for governor, had he not seen the boat aforesaid.

The Whigs, meeting on Friday, the twenty-fifth of September, elected William G. Woodward of Muscatine as temporary chairman and Ralph P. Lowe,⁵ also of Muscatine, as permanent chairman. Thomas McKnight of Dubuque received a majority of votes on the first ballot and was declared the nominee for Governor.⁶

Thomas McKnight was born in Augusta, Hampshire County, Virginia, on March 10, 1787. At the age of sixteen he started out for himself as a peddler. He was in Nashville, Tennessee, for a short time and then came to St. Louis in 1809, where he was employed in one of the stores of the famous Chouteau Company. In Dubuque he was later quoted as the only resident who had ever seen Julien Dubuque, when that worthy miner was in St. Louis and at the Chouteau place. Since Dubuque died in 1810, the acquaintanceship must have been limited.⁷

In the library of the State Historical Society of Iowa there is a considerable collection of papers, letters, memoranda, and the like, of McKnight's, from which it appears that by 1815 he was in business in St. Louis with James,

⁵ Lowe was elected Governor in 1857.

⁶ *The Burlington Hawkeye*, October 1, 1846.

⁷ *History of Dubuque County* (1880), p. 975; *The Iowa City Standard*, October 21, 1846. M. M. Ham in an article in *The Annals of Iowa* (Third Series), Vol. II, p. 335, entitled "The First White Man in Iowa", says that McKnight remembered seeing Julien Dubuque in St. Louis when he was a boy. McKnight, however, was twenty-two when he came to St. Louis.

Robert, and Thomas Brady as Brady, McKnight and Company, with branches in Ste. Genevieve and St. Charles, Missouri. There are numerous references in the files to their business operations, not all of which were profitable. He and Thomas Brady seem to have extended their operations to the east side of the Mississippi, for there are evidences of land holdings in Kaskaskia as early as 1817. He attained standing in a business way in St. Louis; in 1822 he was elected to the city council, and he became a director in the first "Bank of Missouri".

The files indicate that members of his family followed him west. He was given power of attorney by John McKnight, on June 8, 1821, and on October 23, 1823, he was appointed administrator for John's estate. A Robert McKnight also appears in the record. His trading business took him far afield; a letter indicates that in November of 1823 he was in the Arkansas region. In 1814 Thomas McKnight married Miss Fannie Scott, by whom he had five children. Three of the children and Mrs. McKnight died during a short interval in 1823-1824.⁸ The two who survived were William S. and Cornelia.

That McKnight had some embarrassing financial difficulties in St. Louis is evident from the contents of the files.⁹ There is, for example, the record of one judgment against him, dated October 8, 1822, for \$986.90 plus \$35.50 damages. Unless it were satisfied before "January first next", the sheriff, John K. Walker of St. Louis, would expose and offer for sale certain property of McKnight's. Again on February 6, 1824, the same sheriff advertised various items of McKnight's property, including "one negro woman,

⁸ *History of Dubuque County* (1880), p. 975; *The Dubuque Herald*, December 7, 1865.

⁹ McKnight also had financial difficulties after he went north, according to papers in the file.

named Jude''. These circumstances all occurred at about the same period in which his wife and three children died.

From St. Louis, McKnight went to Ste. Genevieve¹⁰ also in Missouri. A letter from George W. Jones, April, 1826, indicates that a friendship had developed between the two men which was later resumed in the mining region. After some three years at Ste. Genevieve, McKnight in 1826 moved north to Galena, Illinois, making the trip on horseback. Galena was then the center of a thriving lead mining and smelting business and in 1827 McKnight was made assistant superintendent of "The Lead Mines on The Fever River".

Galena, in which he opened his office, contained at that time less than a hundred inhabitants. For three years McKnight discharged the duties of this office having sole charge of the business. He kept a complete record of his official acts, nearly all in his own handwriting, and these records indicate business capacity and skill of a high order. This record forms a complete history of the leasing system for the three years he was in charge and was the only record ever made upon the subject. According to a Dubuque newspaper he "collected and paid to the government in the infancy both of the mines and the leasing system, the proceeds of 2,500,000 pounds of mineral, being, it is believed, more rent than was paid over to the government by all his successors in the twenty years intervening his incumbency and the sale of the mineral lands".¹¹

At a memorial meeting of the Dubuque Early Settlers Association, John D. Graffort said that he had known Mr. McKnight since the year 1827.

¹⁰ Biographical data from *The Dubuque Herald*, for December 7, 1865, together with other references from *The Herald*, were generously furnished me by Miss May Clark of the Dubuque Public Library.

¹¹ *The Dubuque Herald*, December 7, 1865.

He was then a government agent residing at Galena, Illinois, and collected the mineral rent of the mining lands. I was then a teamster and at the end of every month hauled the lead of the lead-tax to his ware house. I saw at once he was a good man — we all liked him for his polite and gentle manners and his pleasant way of transacting business. He was a good looking man, a gentleman in his very looks, and a gentleman in all respects and at all times. He had a fresh, florid complexion that might make a stranger suppose him to be intemperate. About that time Mr. McKnight was made a candidate for Governor of Illinois.¹² I was then living in Illinois on the Picatonica River. It was a warm party contest, and some one in our precinct alleged that McKnight was a drunkard and that his face was proof of it. All had seen the face — but none but myself knew that the accusation was a lie. I told the people I knew better, and one anecdote I told them changed their opinion, though they had concluded to vote against him. I told them that I saw Mr. McKnight walking with a gentleman who on passing the door of a saloon, asked him to go in and take a drink. Mr. McKnight stopped suddenly, looked directly at the man, and with a little more positiveness than usual with him, said “No, sir, I never go into such places and I never drink.” I knew Mr. McKnight did not drink, and I insisted that such injustice should not be done. The result of the election, in our precinct, was that all but three or four voted for Mr. McKnight. I never heard a person say a word against him. He was always honored and respected.¹³

With the close of the Black Hawk War and the opening of lands west of the river McKnight began to look for opportunities there. The following letter, addressed to Captain T. C. Legate, Superintendent of the Lead Mines, and dated January 1, 1833, was found among his papers:

I hereby make application for a Grove on the West Bank of the Mississippi River and on the Macoquetty for the purpose of Smelt-

¹² This reference to McKnight as a candidate for Governor of Illinois is apparently an error. Mr. Paul M. Angle, Secretary of the Illinois State Historical Society, writes: “No one named Thomas McKnight ran for any State office in Illinois between the years 1818 and 1848.” Probably Graffort was thinking of the Iowa election of 1846.

¹³ *The Dubuque Herald*, December 7, 1865.

ing Lead on — Beginning at Vaughns Ferry Landing and Running South-West to the first Prairie thence north so as to include some cabbins of Mr. Geo. W. Jones which he built to keep some Provisions in for the miners on the Macoquetty thence with the River Macoquetty to its mouth thence down the Mississippi to the Place of Beginning Supposed to Contain about 640 acres I will Give my bonds and commence operations Immediately Yours Respectfully
Th McKnight

In 1833 he moved over into what was to become Dubuque County and helped found the village of Peru. There he built a smelter in which Francis Gehon was associated with him for a time. Gehon also ran a general store in the vicinity.¹⁴ McKnight seems to have continued interests in Galena, as there are letters directed to him there dated as late as 1836, but his residence was on the Iowa side. With the establishment of Dubuque County by the legislature of Michigan Territory, Acting Governor Stevens T. Mason, on September 8, 1834, appointed McKnight Chief Justice of the Court of Dubuque County. The commission is among the papers in the files. Legal matters and court procedure were out of his line, however, and he declined the appointment.

In 1835 McKnight married Miss Cornelia Hempstead, a cousin of Stephen Hempstead, the first legal practitioner in Dubuque, and the second Governor of the State of Iowa.¹⁵

¹⁴ *History of Dubuque County* (1880), p. 354. Francis Gehon was born in Tennessee in 1797. As a young man he lived in Kentucky and Illinois and had a trading post at Helena, Arkansas. He came to Dodgeville, Wisconsin, had a hand in the Black Hawk War, and in 1833 settled in Dubuque County. He was made U. S. Marshal for Wisconsin Territory in 1836, and succeeded to the similar office in the Territory of Iowa. Governor Robert Lucas made him a brigadier general in the Iowa territorial militia. He was elected to the Council in the Fifth and Sixth Iowa Legislative Assemblies. Gehon died on April 2, 1849.— *History of Dubuque County* (1880), p. 251; *The Palimpsest*, Vol. XIX, p. 354.

¹⁵ He moved into a house in Dubuque shortly after his marriage to Miss Hempstead, in which he continued to live until his death. The Hempsteads were a Connecticut family, numerous members of which moved to the west.

The surviving children by the first marriage were then in school, William S. in Ste. Genevieve in the school of Joseph Hertich¹⁶ and the daughter Cornelia at Bethlehem Academy. The following letter from Cornelia, dated April 26, 1833, is typical of the pre-Victorian days:

Bethlehem Academy Near Perry-Ville

My dearly Beloved Papa,

I received your Affectionate letter from the hand of Rvd Mr. McMahan which gave me great pleasure I will try my dear father and profit by your good advice as much as lies in my power I am very well as is also my Cousin Harriet and hope to meet your approbation in everything i do.—

I remain your loving daughter

C. McKnight

William also wrote his father and one of his letters read as follows:

St. Genevieve February 22, 1833

Dear Father —

I have written to you about the first of this instant and not received an answer but the one which was dated the 24 of ultimo last. I will look for you about the 27 of next month. I hope I wont be deceived in your appointed which you made to me that was you were to return in two months from the time of your departure. I am not able to inform you when Aunt Harriet intends sending her daughter to the Barrens. I am in complete health at the present and have been. Mr. Hertich has now what we may call a complete school I think in number without counting 20 or twenty-one. I am endeavouring to complete an education My studies are Geography Grammer Book-Keeping which I have completed, but still keep in practice Cyphering Polite Learning and other small studies not

Miss Cornelia was the daughter of William S. Hempstead. She was born in 1815 and was twenty-eight years McKnight's junior. Five children were born to them.— *The Dubuque Herald*, December 7, 1865.

¹⁶ Joseph Hertich (or Hertig) ran a private school for boys in Ste. Genevieve. Augustus Caesar Dodge married Hertich's daughter, Clara Anne, in 1837. Mrs. Joseph Hertich was Mercilite de Villars of New Orleans.— Louis Pelzer's *Augustus Caesar Dodge*, p. 45.

worth mentioning. I was in hopes you were going to remain at St. Louis this winter but as you said it was and is such an open winter you concluded upon going to the Lead Mines or rather Galena if preferable. I have not much to inform you off I acknowledge but however such as it is I hope it will be readily accepted of by you all letters wrote from you to me is and will forever be accepted off with great pleasure. I have not seen Sister Cornelia since I saw you but I am in hopes I will in a day or so. No more at present

But regard me with confidence
To Be your affectionate son
Will S. McKnight

Some nameless colored person appears dimly in the record as attested by an unsigned document among the McKnight papers. That Jude of earlier years in St. Louis, listed among the chattels attached by John Walker, sheriff, was owned in Missouri, but that could not legally happen in Iowa. A form of peonage is indicated by a copy of an intriguing document found among the McKnight papers. This possibly could have been enforced in Iowa but there is nothing to show that it was ever more than a blank form. It reads as follows:

This Indenture made and entered into this ninth day of July in the Year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and thirty five between (a woman of color) of the County of DuBuque and Territory of Michigan of her own free will and accord of the first part, and Thomas McKnight of the same County & Territory of the other part Witnesseth; That the said doth by these presents of her own free will and accord bind herself unto the said Thomas McKnight as a servant from the date hereof until the ninth day of July in the year Eighteen Hundred and During all of which time the said his master will and faithfully shall serve; his secrets keep, and his lawful commands every where, at all times readily obey, She shall do no damage to her said master, nor, knowingly suffer any to be done by others, She shall not waste the goods of her said master nor lend them unlawfully to any, nor from the service of her master she shall not absent unless by his consent, but in all things and at all times, she shall demean and conduct herself

as a good and faithful servant ought during the whole term aforesaid:

And the said Thomas McKnight on his part does hereby covenant and agree, to furnish the said good and sufficient diet, clothing, lodging and other necessities convenient and useful for said servant during the term aforesaid, and he further agrees at the expiration of the term above mentioned provided the said servant acts agreeably to the stipulations herein contained to set her at liberty to act and do for herself as she may deem proper . . .

Be it remembered that this day came before me a Justice of the peace in and for said County & Territory (a woman of color) and Thomas McKnight both of the County of DuBuque whose names appear to the above written Indenture and acknowledged the same to be signed by them for the purposes therein contained

Given under my hand and seal this day of July A. D. 1835

Justice of the peace

Seal

McKnight was named the first postmaster in Peru which was described as "near to the County of Jo Daviess in the State of Illinois". The commission, signed by W. T. Barry, Postmaster General, was dated September 23, 1833. When the new Wisconsin Territory was set up by Act of Congress in 1836, including the region west of the Mississippi River and north of Missouri, McKnight was elected a member of the Council from Dubuque County, together with John Foley and Thomas M'Craney. The county's representatives in the House were Peter H. Engle, who was made the Speaker, Loring Wheeler, Hardin Nowlin, Hosea T. Camp, and Patrick Quigley.¹⁷ The legislature met at Belmont, Wisconsin,¹⁸ in a barren frontier community of two or three cabins, a tavern, and a hastily constructed frame building as a capitol.

¹⁷ *Acts Passed at the First and Second Sessions of the Legislative Assembly of the Territory of Wisconsin*, p. 12.

¹⁸ The site of Belmont is now a Wisconsin State Park and the old frame capitol is preserved in good condition.

One of the most contested questions was that of the location of a permanent capital. John Doty had a site at the Four Lakes, Wisconsin, now Madison, for which he was pushing; there was no building on it, but Doty had political ability. Dubuque would have liked to get the honor, as would Burlington. McKnight was active in Dubuque's behalf, and, in protest, voted against the final selection of Doty's site. Burlington, on the Iowa side, was selected as the temporary capital until Madison could be made ready. The legislature plunged into the problem of legislation. A bill was passed with McKnight's active influence setting up a territorial university and designating McKnight as one of the trustees, but in the two years which elapsed before the Territory of Iowa was organized in 1838, no action was taken towards the location of the proposed university.¹⁹

In the midst of public activities Thomas McKnight had personal problems to solve. Early in 1838 he received the following interesting letter illustrating a social custom of the past:

Ste. Genevieve Missouri 23d March 1838

Mr. Thomas McKnight

Respected Sir

You will doubtless properly estimate the feelings which a you[ng] man totally unacquainted must have in writing to a father for approbation to marry his daughter — nor would I venture to do so without accompanying the application with the evidence and recommendation of those known to us both and which I hope will be satisfactory — I could also refer you to Col. G. W. Jones if at home and many others in your quarter if deemed necessary. Your daughter Miss Cornelia and my self have come to an agreement with the consent of all friends on both sides of the house here to embark in the voyage of life together — And your consent is the only one wanted to complete the list of those whome we deem it our duty to consult.

¹⁹ See *The Annals of Iowa* (Third Series), Vol. II, p. 317, Vol. III, p. 389, Vol. IV, pp. 4 ff.

Will you on the receipt of this please write to me as early as convenient and oblige.

Very respectfully yours

Charles Bogy

McKnight also received a letter from his brother-in-law, John Scott, under date of March 23, 1838, commending Charles Bogy "son of your old and intimate friend Joseph Bogy". Evidently he accepted the opinion voiced in these letters, for Cornelia became Mrs. Bogy. The young couple continued to live in Ste. Genevieve, but after a few years trouble pursued them and in a letter dated August 15, 1846, Bogy appealed to his father-in-law for assistance in getting a position. The letter read as follows:

My dear friend.

I am now looking for a place to go to for I must quit the place where I am now. I have lost every thing I had there & got noting. I am at a lost to know what to do. I wrote to Jones to get a place in his office but there was no vacant place, if you know of any thing that I can go at I wish you would let me know as soon as convenient, if you write write at the mines (Avoca) in haste

Your son

all well

Chas Bogy

The Bogys later took up the western trail. In 1861 they were in Denver where hard luck seems to have followed them across the plains. Bogy's letter refers to his misfortunes and to an effort to sell property in St. Louis to meet his debts.

William S. McKnight, the son, also found the trail toward the west; the following letter, written four months before Charles Bogy's plea quoted above indicates that William is disturbed about his sister even while thinking of business in a big way:

St. Louis Apr 1 1846

Mr. Thos McKnight

Dr Father

I arrived here two days since & am purchasing a heavy block of goods for Santa Fe again I desire taking out \$12,000 worth. I did very well last year made about \$4000 clear. I have taken in a partner, whom I left in charge of my business at Santa Fe. I have written you 8 or 9 letters & have recd none in answer. Do if you please write me & let me know how all is &c & what about Cornelia is she living with you or not. Excuse haste & say to Cornelia to write to me I leave here in 20 days Write to me here & at Independence.

NB. Would to God I
could see you.

Your affet Son
Wm S McKnight

When the United States Land Office was established in Dubuque in 1838, McKnight was appointed receiver with B. Rush Petrikin as register. He continued in that position until the spring of 1845. A letter from Petrikin dated July 30, 1840, advised McKnight to get a fireproof safe for his papers.

There had been some question of McKnight's politics before the appointment was made. Correspondence with George W. Jones, the Delegate in Congress from Wisconsin Territory, indicates that some persons were questioning his Democratic adherence. On March 11, 1838, Jones wrote from Washington: "an effort will be made to prevent your getting the receivership on the ground of your former opposition to General Jackson. I am satisfied of your change of sentiment, but it is necessary that I should have something from you in writing to prove your Democratic principles".

On March 15, 1838, McKnight wrote Henry Dodge, Governor of Wisconsin Territory, asking his support. Dodge replied giving several reasons why letters were not of much effect; but said he was going to Washington soon and that he would see President Van Buren in McKnight's be-

half. Again, on April 18th, Jones wrote about McKnight's "supposed Whig principles". "I know them unfounded but give me something from yourself occasionally that I may use it in your behalf when the trying time comes."

There are no papers indicating what assurances McKnight gave Jones; but he got the appointment. In December Jones wrote McKnight concerning an election contest started against him by John Doty, a power in Wisconsin politics, and asking advice of McKnight. With the advent of the Whig administration of Harrison and Tyler, McKnight asked for reappointment and there seemed to be no question of his Whig adherence by that time. He asked help from A. C. Dodge, the Iowa Territorial Delegate in Congress, and under date of January 19, 1842, Dodge, a Democrat, wrote from Washington that naturally he did not have much influence with this Whig administration, but he added: "I prefer you to any man of your party not only in Dubuque but throughout the whole territory". He went on to say that McKnight's relations with the party in power made no difference, however, and that he, Dodge, would do what he could. He commended "the able and faithful manner in which you have discharged the duties devolving on you are such that no Democrat in the territory should think of applying or for a moment of getting your office. In that case I am for you might and main".

On April 1, 1842, the Secretary of the Treasury, Walter Forward, a Whig, wrote to Dodge for advice as to McKnight's "character and fitness for the office". He was finally reappointed and served until the Polk administration brought the Democrats back again, and Stephen Langworthy was appointed to succeed him. In the files is a receipt for office equipment signed by Langworthy, which enumerates various books of records and finally "some stationery, including quills, steel pens, red and black ink,

sealing wax wafers, rules etc., 2 iron safes, gold sealer, etc."

There seems to have been no question that he was a Whig in 1846 when that party presented him as its candidate for Governor. With the nomination of Briggs and McKnight, the short campaign moved on. The partisan papers talked banks, the liquor question, and personalities. Some Whigs became temperance talkers rather quickly for campaign purposes. Thomas H. Benton, Jr., wrote to Ansel Briggs: "In addition to other things the license question has been brought forward and has absorbed everything creative to the election — some of the Whigs have become very temperate all at once and do not get drunk more than once a week". The bank issue was discussed a good deal, the Whigs demanding an amendment to the new Constitution. The declaration or platform of the Whig convention declared:

We regard the adoption of the constitution at the recent election, from the ultra-partisan character of some of its provisions as an event not calculated to promote the future welfare and prosperity of the State of Iowa; that it is our imperative duty to procure its speedy amendment.

While the Whigs talked about Briggs' obscurity and tried to find out who he was, the Democrats got hold of charges that monies due the government and the city of Dubuque by McKnight had not been accounted for following his removal as receiver of the land office. Harsh words such as "defaulter" were used.²⁰ McKnight's files show numerous communications from Washington claiming certain considerable balances due the government, but the whole thing boiled down upon the final audit to a meagre balance of some \$38.00, which had remained temporarily unpaid be-

²⁰ *The Iowa Standard* (Iowa City), October 21, 1846, quoted the *Miners' Express* (Dubuque) as making this charge.

cause of an error in figures. Concerning a claim made by the city of Dubuque, Charles Corkery had written to McKnight in February, 1846:

Dubuque 19 Feby. 1846

Dr. Sir

As I learn that you are in Iowa today I take the liberty to drop you a line in relation to the money due to the City Authorities.

O'Ferrall has told me that the whole Board are friendly to you, and that they have had a private consultation with each other, and are desirous that you should propose some terms to them, as they say that the next Board *may* not be friendly to you. We wish particularly that you would hand over the Amt of Scrip and other paper which you hold, and they will give you full credit for it.

O'Ferrall also says that it is only necessary for you to see him, and any arrangements you might make with him will be recognized by the Board. He acts, at least, as if he were your friend, and appears very desirous that the relation in which you stand with them should be kept from the public as much as possible. I believe it is known to most of the citizens of the town now, and a private conversation with O'Ferrall might stop it there.

I felt anxious that somebody should make this suggestion to you, and I spoke to Mr. Quigley to do so, but he recommended me to drop you a line.

Yours truly

Chas Corkery

Thos. McKnight Esq

This story was brought up during the campaign, and *The Iowa Standard* replied, "Why these charges now; if the Democratic mayor and aldermen of Dubuque believe that they have a case, why don't they make him pay?" It appears that such charges were due in part to the fluctuating value of money in use at that time.

Some estimate of the campaign can be had from the following letter from Ralph P. Lowe of Bloomington (Muscatine):

Bloomington Iowa Tery Sept 28th 1846

Thomas McKnight

Sir

I hope you will pardon me for troubling you with a suggestion or so at this time— On the 25th inst. you received your nomination for governor with great unanimity by the Whig convention that met at Iowa City on that occasion— A very great anxiety is felt hereabouts and south of this as I have understood for your election, and I have no doubt but you have the undivided sympathy of the entire Whig party for your success— Gov. Lucas will take the field as an independent candidate— I am not altogether unadvised when I say he will get no Whigs votes in this section of the Territory— I am only afraid that he will not get many democratic votes, but still we trust he will get enough to jeopard the election of Briggs— Yet should he not draw any more votes from the Locos than from our party, still from my knowledge of the two parties, 400 democratic votes in addition to the support of the Whig party ought to elect you governor of the State— Cannot these be had north of the Iowa river, Certainly when we remember how much better you are known over the north part of the Territory than Briggs, we are justified in the conclusion you can get that number of Democratic votes, if your friends will exert themselves— No one seems able to answer the question Who is Mr. Briggs? And as long as he is unknown he may run pretty well, but if any thing in your opinion can be made by a better knowledge of his character I would be oblige to you or any one else who would favor me with the information— I would be glad to know what are his pretensions to the chief magistracy of this State— The truth is I design to be diligent & active in the support of our ticket at the coming election, and I hope you will not be to modest to give me a little more information in detail of yourself than I now possess. if you are unwilling to do it yourself get some of your friends to do it. I wish to use it, and may do so to a good purpose in some places I wish to know the place of your nativity— How long you have been in the west and especially in this valley & Territory & such other information as you may deem important to be used in the canvass— There is nothing like keeping a man's name prominently before the people up to the time of the election.

We will endeavor to attend to your interest in this part of the

Territory — Should you pass through this County, if home, I should be very much pleased to see you at my house.— I am of the opinion that you should by all means spend the last week before the election in Lee County — the result of the election will depend much upon the vote of that county

You will do me a kindness in sending the enclose note to Mr. Mobley

Yours in very great haste

R. P. Lowe

In Scott County, Ebenezer Cook took hold of Whig matters and made the following report:

Davenport Oct 14, 1846

Th. McKnight Esq

Dr Sir

I rec'd a day or two since from T. Davis Esq a copy of your circular and have caused it to be inserted in our paper and have also had two hundred copies extra struck off containing it & the Whig state address.

Tomorrow I start men with them for distribution.

Mr Mitchell is not yet able to travel. He had hoped to be at Dubuque on Saturday but his health will not permit. He will be there the fore part of the week I think.

Everything looks fair here — We are wide awake and there are some of us who are devoting our entire time to the cause —

I shall go up in the Dubuque stage in the morning & take this as far as I go, perhaps to Andrew.

I am on a Mission for the cause

Yours Truly

Ebenezer Cook

The *Burlington Hawkeye* stirred its editorial pen in its issue of October first to say:

We know of no man in Iowa on whom the people could bestow their suffrages to better advantage for the first governor of the state than on the Hon. Thos. McKnight. He has been in Iowa ever since it had an existence and previous to that while he was a member of the Council when the legislature of Wisconsin met in this place, he was highly esteemed and much respected. All our older

citizens remember him as one of the most talented and influential members of that body. He was appointed Receiver in the Land Office at Du Buque, by Van Buren which office he held until removed by the present administration. So much esteemed was he by all parties that several hundred Democrats in Du Buque remonstrated against his removal and petitioned the president to retain him in office. We have known him for the last nine years and we know no man so exactly fitted for the office of governor. His intimate knowledge of the territory from its infancy — his elevated moral character — his high intellectual endowments — and his regard for the interests of the people eminently qualify him for the station to which we believe a majority of the people will elevate him on the twenty-sixth day of this month. He is truly the people's man. We say nothing of his opponent. All we know of him is that he is a Mr. Briggs of Jackson County, and because he lived in Jackson and the Polkites were determined to give that county something on account of its giving the greatest majority for the constitution, and because his name was Briggs, he was nominated. We know no more of him than this. We hope, however, to be better acquainted with him hereafter, as we look to see both the candidates in our part of the territory before the election.

On his part, Thomas McKnight apparently did little campaigning. He published a statement concerning his candidacy in *The Iowa Standard* of October 21, 1846, from which the following paragraphs are quoted:

It would give me great pleasure to be able to visit my fellow citizens generally throughout the state, and make their acquaintance, but my private business, my health, and the circumstances of my family utterly forbid it.

I have been long a resident of the Mississippi Valley, and while it has been growing from an inconsiderable beginning into, as it were, a populous and wealthy nation. I emigrated to St. Louis from Virginia in 1809; since which time St. Louis and the country above it on the Mississippi, has been my home. I located at Galena, Illinois, in 1826, from whence I removed to Iowa, (my present residence,) shortly after the Black Hawk Purchase. During much of this time I have held subordinate places under the government, in the management of the Lead Mines, and in the Land Office.

How I have discharged the duties of the respective places I have filled, it better becomes others to say than myself. This much may perhaps be permitted, that with the greatest economy and exertion on my own part, I have but little to leave my family, but the reputation and character I have sustained, whatever it may be.

I have thus passed the better part of not a short life, among a people who may be said to be peculiarly devoted and attached to free institutions, and enjoying the benefit of them; a people peculiarly free, both in theory and fact; and that I am devoted to such institutions, and the people living under them, it cannot be necessary to affirm; and that the strongest wishes of my heart as a man are, that we may so use and preserve our free institutions, as that those who may succeed us, may not only enjoy the full benefit of them, but introduce those improvements which the progress of society and advancement of civilization may point out.

During the time I have been competent to pay attention to national affairs, there have been those who have strenuously contended for the policy of so shaping our national course, as to call out to its greatest extent, American ingenuity, capital and skill, in supplying immediately American wants, and rendering available to our independence of foreign nations whatever may be found in our climate, in our soil, in our mines, and in our waters. This policy has been sought to be fostered and encouraged by raising a sufficiency, mainly of revenue, for the economical administration of our government upon the production of foreign capital and labor; seeking purchasers in our own markets, and in the imposition of duties, so to discriminate as to favor all those productions which can be furnished by ourselves. Of this policy I have been a constant and uniform supporter.

To facilitate exchange and commerce among ourselves, there have been, and are many distinguished statesmen and patriots who have believed it the duty of the General Government, upon whom is devolved the power to regulate commerce between the States by the Constitution of the United States, to improve and render safe the channels of that exchange and commerce. Of this also I have been the advocate.

In regard to our own State Government, may we not be permitted to hope, that availing ourselves of the experience of others, we may be able to avoid many of those evils which have preyed, and are preying upon the prosperity of other States, by adhering

to a strict economy in our State affairs, and shunning a public debt.²¹

The election occurred on October 26th, and Briggs won by the narrow margin of 247 votes. The official canvass showed the result 7626 to 7379. The vote was so close that there was some uncertainty about it until the legislature made the official canvass. In his inaugural address Briggs made a mildly facetious reference to it by gently apologizing for the address, saying that he had received notice of his election only four days before.²²

The legislature convened on Monday, November 30th, and Governor Briggs was inaugurated on Thursday, December 3rd, all without Federal recognition of the new State. The final act providing for the admission of Iowa to the Union was not approved by President Polk until December 28, 1846, and this date is recognized as the birthday of the State of Iowa, but its political machinery had already been moving for nearly a month.²³

A peculiar political situation presented itself to the voters the following year. At this first election in 1846, the new State was entitled to two members in the United States House of Representatives. There was, of course, no legislature of the State with authority to lay out districts and these Congressmen were elected at large. The Whigs had nominated on the ticket headed by Thomas McKnight, Joseph H. Hedrick of Wapello County and G. C. R. Mitchell of Davenport. The Democrats nominated S. Clinton Hastings of Bloomington (Muscatine) and Shepherd Leffler of Burlington. Hastings and Leffler were elected and took their seats on December 29, 1846, the day after President

²¹ *The Iowa Standard* (Iowa City), October 21, 1846.

²² *Messages and Proclamations of the Governors of Iowa*, Vol. I, p. 368.

²³ Shambaugh's *Documentary Material Relating to the History of Iowa*, Vol. I, pp. 130, 131.

Polk signed the bill admitting Iowa as a State. They thus began their term in the second or short session of the Twenty-ninth Congress which expired on March 3, 1847. The terms of Hastings and Leffler expired with the Twenty-ninth Congress whereas other members of Congress elected at the fall election of 1846 were elected to the Thirtieth Congress and would take their seats on December 6, 1847. Iowa would thus be without any representation when the Thirtieth Congress convened in December, 1847, since the first session of the Iowa General Assembly got itself mired down in a partisan impasse and failed to elect Senators, leaving Iowa without members of that body for the first two years of the State's existence.

Iowa proceeded to the election of Representatives in Congress in 1847 although there was apparently no legal provision for an election that year. A bill had been introduced in the State Senate on February 10, 1847, to provide for such election; it passed both the Senate and the House, but there was no further record of it. It was, apparently, not presented to the Governor and the Secretary of State claimed he had never received it.²⁴

The Whigs of the new first district in the southern section of the State met in convention in Fairfield and nominated Jesse B. Brown of Lee County. The Democrats of the first district nominated William Thompson of Fairfield. S. Clinton Hastings was not a candidate for reelection; the western fever had laid hold on him and his later history was written on the Pacific coast. The Democrats of the second district met in Bloomington with a contest on their hands. Leffler wanted a renomination; and Dubuque dele-

²⁴ *Journal of the Senate*, 1846-1847, pp. 209, 234, 256, 262; *Journal of the House of Representatives*, 1846-1847, p. 403; *The Iowa Standard*, August 18, 1847. For the full story of this extraordinary election of members of Congress see Louis B. Schmidt's "History of Congressional Elections in Iowa" in *THE IOWA JOURNAL OF HISTORY AND POLITICS*, Vol. X, pp. 484-502.

gates came down the river with a candidate in the person of young Thomas H. Benton, Jr., nephew of "Old Bullion", Senator Thomas H. Benton. Leffler won the nomination. There is no record of a Whig convention in the second district, but Thomas McKnight announced his candidacy early in May and was "nominated by acclamation". His unexpectedly strong run against Briggs the year before had commended him to party leaders. His campaign received impetus from letters like the following:

Davenport May 3, 1847

Dr Sir

After a full and extensive correspondence with most of the counties in this Congressional District we find that Thomas McKnight of your place is the choice of the Whigs as our candidate for congress. We have therefore determined to announce him without a convention. The "Hawkeye" & "Herald" will hoist his colors this week.

It was believed that the announcement had better come from the south and be responded to in the north. The "Gazette" will come out for him next week and we desire that the "Tribune" should hoist his flag in the first paper published after the receipt of the "Hawk Eye" or "Herald" containing the announcement — We have much to do if this District is carried & *carried it must be*. Do my dear sir wake up the Whigs in the north and although they are in a minority in most of the counties still they must recollect every Whig vote given in the north will aid the Whig Counties of the south.

Yours truly

Ebenezer Cook²⁵

The election was held on August 2, 1847, since the members of the legislature were chosen on the first Monday of that month, and Leffler won by a vote of 5156 to McKnight's 4873. Two weeks later *The Iowa Standard* of Iowa City raised the question of the legality of this election, pointing out that there was no provision either by the State or Fed-

²⁵ This letter was written to A. P. Wood, editor of the *Dubuque Tribune*.

eral government for an election in 1847. *The Standard* laid the blame flatly on the General Assembly for neglect to provide such authority, but it pointed out that Thompson and Leffler were the choice of the people of the State and conceded that it would not have "the election declared null and void for want of a law authorizing it". Other papers took up the question and for once laid aside the poisonous partisan pens that usually wrote their diatribes. Thompson and Leffler got their certificates of election signed by Governor Briggs. They journeyed to Washington where they presented themselves to the House of Representatives at the beginning of the Thirtieth Congress in December, 1847, and were seated without any minute examination of the authenticity of the vote that sent them there. Thomas McKnight stayed in Dubuque with his business, with his second wife, Cornelia, and their children, of whom eventually there were five.

In 1848 the Whigs selected General Zachary Taylor, who had emerged from the Mexican War with some glory, as their candidate for President, despite the fact that he never had cast a vote in a presidential election, and they elected him. That meant another housecleaning of lesser officials in 1849. McKnight again became a candidate for a place in the land office. He enlisted the help of E. B. Washburne of Galena, who wrote a cordial and ready promise of help.²⁶ This time McKnight was made register of the land office. The original certificate of appointment is dated May 18, 1848, and signed by Z. Taylor. He served until another party reversal with the election of Franklin K. Pierce in 1852 produced another housecleaning.

There is little of record concerning Thomas McKnight

²⁶ The Washburnes and McKnights must have been on intimate terms of friendship. In a letter of October 19, 1852, to McKnight, Washburne said, "My wife sends regards to Uncle Tom". Mrs. Washburne was Adele Gratiot of the important pioneer family in Galena.

after that. The files peter out at about 1861. He quietly continued in business in Dubuque. The Whig Party disappeared, but the new Republican Party came in its place and took over the affairs of the State of Iowa with the election of 1854. A newer group of political leaders emerged. The war between the States broke loose and ran its bloody course to its end in 1865.

That the varied and numerous political upsets had not entered seriously into his personal friendships appears from a letter from George W. Jones, his long-time friend in Ste. Genevieve, in the Fever River Diggings, and in Dubuque. Senator Jones wrote him from Washington on July 3, 1853, sending some clover seed which Charles Mason, Commissioner of Patents, had given him, saying, "As you are a better farmer than I am and have a better soil to try the experiment upon, I send you this seed to raise on the shares, recollecting that I am to have the half the proceeds of the seed. Your friend, Geo. W. Jones"

His son, William S. McKnight, was carrying on his trading business in the far west and Cornelia and her husband were in Denver, near which city Charles Bogy had a quartz mill. On May 7, 1861, Cornelia wrote her father about life out beyond the States in the months following Fort Sumter. Some recent experiences will be recalled by a letter from her to her father in 1861, in which she wrote: "Potatoes are thirteen cents a pound and it does not take many to make a pound. It takes about four times as much money to live on here as it does in the states and live mighty plain at that".

Eighteen-sixty-five wore itself away. It had been a stirring year — Appomattox, the tragedy in Ford's Theatre in Washington, the men in uniform going home, north and south. Thomas McKnight's seventy-eight years were weighing him down. Finally on November 29th of that year

he followed his old friend Patrick Quigley,²⁷ with whom he had served in that first Wisconsin territorial legislature away back in 1836, out into unknown frontiers. *The Dubuque Herald* for December first announced his death. The burial occurred on the third in Linwood Cemetery.

On December seventh *The Dubuque Herald* ran a story concerning a meeting held by the Early Settlers Association in honor of Thomas McKnight, one of the original members of the organization. It was held on the morning of Sunday, December third. Arrangements were made for the members to attend the funeral that afternoon in a body, pall bearers were designated, and several offered their eulogies of their pioneer neighbor, in addition to that delivered by John D. Graffort, who has already been quoted.

Warner Lewis said that "he had known Mr. McKnight well since the year 1818, and his social and business acquaintance had continued with him ever since. As a young man in business in St. Louis, he was highly respected for his ability, and as a gentleman of sterling honesty and of the most upright conduct in every relation of life. To his political opponents he indicated such kindness of heart and such a generous spirit that no one ever took offense at any words he ever said. It was this firm adherence to principle and his kindly manners and genial nature that made him so highly respected."

S. M. Langworthy said that "he approved of all that had been said and he desired especially to bear witness to Mr. McKnight's uprightness as a business man. He was a smelter when I first knew him, in 1835, and I was a miner and sold him mineral. Mr. L. referred to the influence of Mr. McKnight when he was Receiver of the Dubuque Land

²⁷ Patrick Quigley was born in Londonderry, Ireland, in 1799. He came to Dubuque in 1833, where he remained a familiar and distinguished figure until his death on August 10, 1865.

Office, in preventing the violence that would have grown out of the conflicting claims in buying public lands, had it not been in a great measure prevented by the nerve, discretion, and personal influence of Mr. McKnight”.

Another of the paragraphs in the newspaper story reads:

His memory of the first settlers on the banks of the Mississippi, and the important events connected with the settlement of the Mississippi Valley, was fresh and accurate. He frequently saw and was personally acquainted with Julien Dubuque. He participated and well remembered the joy with which the success of steam navigation on the Mississippi River was hailed throughout the valley and especially the first steam navigation of the Missouri. He had seen a very sparsely settled and ill defended frontier take on the strength and numbers of a powerful empire. He was the last representative among us of the events that succeeded the purchase of Louisiana from France and its settlement by Americans — an age that has passed into history.

The newspaper account quoted the President, Dr. T. Mason, as saying:

In his official relations with the public he stood very high . . . indeed above reproach that not only no individual ever complained of any neglect of duty on his part, but everybody had commended, at the time and ever since, the official politeness, kindness, correctness and honesty of Thomas McKnight, and through the thirty-three years of his residence here, his character stood, and remains to this day unblemished — not the least stain of any kind upon it either officially, socially, morally or otherwise. He was a very liberal man in his social, political and religious views. I had a high respect for him before I ever had any private interviews with him, and then I regarded him more highly than before. I feel it an honor to myself that I can bear testimony to the worth of such a good man. His universal politeness and amiable manners endeared him to all who knew him.

There is no record in the Dubuque County records of any will of Thomas McKnight. Mrs. McKnight lived on until 1891, and her will filed on June 12th of that year named as

heirs living children Louisa E. Scott, John McKnight (who was made executor), Joseph H. McKnight, and Mary Rebecca McKnight. It made disposition of considerable property.

Both Thomas and Cornelia McKnight are buried in Linwood Cemetery, near the lot where Stephen Hempstead and his wife lie. The large McKnight lot is well occupied, the markers showing, besides Thomas and Cornelia, John, Joseph H., Charles Bogy, Baby Scott, Grace, Mary Rebecca, Eliza J., and Belle.

No one in Dubuque, the city he helped to establish, knows about Thomas McKnight now. There is no record of any descendants in that city or elsewhere. A century has passed since his friends thought him worthy of their votes for high office and he has been forgotten; but, for that matter, how many citizens of Iowa know offhand the name of the successful candidate for Governor of Iowa in that "Year of Decision"?

CHARLES E. SNYDER

DAVENPORT IOWA