

JAMES L. THOMPSON

As the year eighteen hundred and fifty entered into its summer, Iowa's first Governor, Ansel Briggs, realized that his four-year term was drawing to its close and that no second term was in store for him. The political leaders were already looking about for his successor.¹

The Democrats met in convention in Iowa City on June 12, 1850, to nominate a ticket for State officers. Three candidates for the nomination for Governor appeared—Stephen Hempstead of Dubuque, Ver Planck Van Antwerp of Keokuk, and Edward Livingstone of Lee County. After seven ballots Livingstone withdrew and the most of his strength went to Hempstead who was nominated.²

The Whigs had met in Iowa City on May 16th and had nominated a young attorney of Iowa City, James Harlan, who had come to Iowa from Indiana in 1846 to take on the presidency of the recently projected Iowa City College,³ under the auspices of the Methodist Episcopal Church. A board of trustees for the proposed college had been chosen and the Reverend James L. Thompson, a retired Methodist preacher, had been named president of the board. Thomp-

¹ Governor Ansel Briggs returned to Andrew to live. He had one son, John L. Briggs, a newspaper man, who lived in Omaha and later in Idaho. Ex-Governor Briggs moved to Council Bluffs and then to Omaha, where he died in 1881. He is buried at Andrew.—Edward H. Stiles's *Recollections and Sketches of Notable Lawyers and Public Men of Early Iowa*, pp. 53-56.

² See *The Annals of Iowa* (Third Series), Vol. XXV, p. 147. The remaining names on the Democratic ticket were: Secretary of State, G. W. McCleary of Louisa County; Auditor, Wm. Pattee of Lee County; Treasurer, Israel Kister of Davis County.—*The Davenport Gazette*, June 13, 1850.

³ For the story of Harlan and the Iowa City College see Johnson Brigham's *James Harlan*, pp. 36-40, and Benjamin F. Shambaugh's *The Old Stone Capitol Remembers*, pp. 320-322.

son was commissioned to go back to Indiana, his former residence, to find a principal or president for the new institution. Upon consultation with the faculty of Asbury College (now DePauw University) he offered the position to young Harlan, who had been graduated from Asbury with the class of 1845. Harlan, newly married, eagerly accepted the position, and with his wife drove back to Iowa City with Thompson, arriving on March 25, 1846. The collegiate venture did not turn out very successfully. The college had been incorporated by legislative action in 1843, but when Harlan came he found little preparation for actual work. A site for a college building had been secured on Market Street between Linn and Jefferson, but no building was ever erected there. During the brief life of the institution classes were heard in a building erected by the Methodist Protestant Church on the present site of the First Christian Church on Iowa Avenue. Eventually the college effort was abandoned by the Iowa Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church for another in Mount Vernon, now Cornell College.

Harlan then read law and was admitted to the bar in Iowa City. He did some surveying, was active generally in public affairs, and had established a reputation as a public speaker. As a result of his activities, the Whigs of Iowa nominated him for Governor, although he was only twenty-nine years old.

That "only twenty-nine years old" immediately presented a difficulty. The Constitution of Iowa provided that the Governor of the State "must have attained the age of thirty years at the time of said election." Harlan had already been the victim of some political shenanigans that left him with unpleasant memories. The First General Assembly of the State had passed an act approved by Governor Ansel Briggs on January 24, 1847, creating the office

of Superintendent of Public Instruction, to be elected "at the next annual township election", April fifth that year.

Harlan quickly announced himself as the Whig candidate for the office. The salary of \$1200 a year looked inviting to him in view of his meagre income from the college, which had to come out of the tuitions paid by the students. Indeed that twelve hundred dollars was more than the Governor received. The Democrats designated Charles Mason of Burlington, former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the Territory of Iowa, as their candidate. Harlan, with the vigor of youth, pursued an active campaign, south and north from Iowa City, taking his older friend, James L. Thompson, along. Mason issued a public announcement of his candidacy in a vein which Harlan thought sarcastic and irritating, and let it go at that. To almost everyone's astonishment, in the Democratic Iowa of 1847, Harlan was elected.

Then he was challenged by the question of the invalidity of his election on the ground that the law creating the office had not been published according to law, either in a book of legislative proceedings or in newspapers, before the April election, and that therefore it was not in effect at that time. He assumed the office, however, discharged its duties, and drew the salary; but the courts finally decided that the election was invalid and that another election must be held in April of 1848. This time he ran against Thomas H. Benton, Jr., of Dubuque.⁴ On the face of the returns Harlan

⁴Thomas H. Benton, Jr., was a nephew and namesake of the United States Senator from Missouri. The younger Benton lived in Dubuque and later in Council Bluffs. He deserted the Democrats on the slavery issue, became a Republican, and fought as a colonel in the Union Army. In 1865 he was designated as a candidate for Governor of Iowa by a group who styled themselves "the Anti-Negro Party", and was endorsed by the Democrats. He was defeated by Governor William M. Stone running for a second term. He died in St. Louis in 1879.—Stiles's *Recollections and Sketches of Notable Lawyers and Public Men of Early Iowa*, p. 908.

was elected by a majority of nine votes, but the Democratic election officials, practicing extreme partisanship, threw out numerous ballots because of various misspellings of his name, so common in those days of informal printing of ballots, and declared Benton elected.⁵

In view of that experience, Harlan decided that "only twenty-nine years old" would be likely to present another opportunity for more partisan sniping. The election would fall on August 5th, and Harlan would not be thirty until August 26th. That was only a few days, but it would be enough for more legal questions if by chance he should be elected. Hence he declined the nomination⁶ and the Reverend Mr. Thompson was substituted. He became the Whigs' forlorn hope of 1850. Had the nomination been other than a forlorn hope, there were numerous patriotic Whigs who would have been glad to offer their services.⁷

Thompson appeared as a candidate out of more or less obscurity. He had become well known in the Iowa City region and to some extent among the Methodist congregations in Iowa; but otherwise he was not known generally in the new State. He had come to Iowa as a retired Methodist minister in 1840 from the Indiana Conference. A campaign article in *The Davenport Gazette* for July 18, 1850, reprinted from the *Iowa City Republican*, says that he was born in Kentucky. Another article, this time originating in *The Gazette*, on July 25th, says that he was fifty-nine years old then. According to that he was born about 1790.

⁵ For the story of this political mix-up see Johnson Brigham's *James Harlan*, pp. 51-63.

⁶ Harlan went on, of course, to high political estate in the U. S. Senate and in the cabinet of the President of the United States and, finally, to defeat by Republican factionalism.

⁷ "The issue was not doubtful from the first. Hempstead was eloquent and forcible in oratory, of great popularity with all classes".—Edgar R. Harlan's *A Narrative History of the People of Iowa*, Vol. I, p. 262.

Dr. Ruth A. Gallaher, in an article, "The Methodist Episcopal Church of Iowa City",⁸ says: "In June, 1840, Reverend James L. Thompson, a veteran itinerant, visited Iowa City and probably preached. He had served in Illinois, Missouri, and Indiana and had been retired, but his idea of retirement was to settle in a new and fast growing community and take a lively interest in the nurture of the early Methodist Episcopal Church in a new town. Reverend Thompson soon became a resident of Iowa City."

Edmund H. Waring, in his *History of the Iowa Annual Conference*, says that James L. Thompson joined the Missouri Conference in 1821. Upon the division of this conference he was a member of the Illinois Conference and when this was divided he was in the Indiana Conference, from which he superannuated in 1840.⁹ What Mr. Thompson did or where he lived before 1821 is not recorded.

The reference to the Missouri Conference does not, of itself, mean that Mr. Thompson ever lived in that State. Between 1816 and 1824 a part of Indiana and the whole of Illinois were in the Missouri Conference. The General Conference of 1824 formed the States of Indiana and Illinois into the Illinois Conference, which continued until 1832 when the Indiana Conference was organized.¹⁰ Thompson's name appears in the Methodist Episcopal Church records in a memorandum "admitted on trial, 1822. Patoka, Missouri Conference, Indiana District". He remained on trial in the Missouri Conference in 1823 and 1824, being assigned to Corydon, Indiana District. In 1825, after the organization of the Illinois Conference he is listed at Charleston, later Charlestown, no longer on trial. In 1826, 1827, and 1828 he was assigned to Lawrenceburg Station, Indiana

⁸ THE IOWA JOURNAL OF HISTORY AND POLITICS, Vol. XXXVII, p. 386.

⁹ Waring's *History of the Iowa Annual Conference*, pp. 103-106.

¹⁰ William Warren Sweet's *Circuit-Rider Days in Indiana*, pp. 32, 42, 52.

District, Illinois Conference. His later appointments were as follows:¹¹

- 1829 White Water, Madison District, Illinois Conference
- 1830 Madison, Madison District, Illinois Conference
- 1831 Charlestown, Charlestown District, Illinois Conference
- 1832 Presiding Elder, Vincennes District, Indiana Conference
- 1833 Presiding Elder, Vincennes District, Indiana Conference
- 1834 Presiding Elder, Crawfordsville District, Indiana Conference
- 1835 Presiding Elder, Crawfordsville District, Indiana Conference
- 1836 Presiding Elder, Crawfordsville District, Indiana Conference
- 1837 Greencastle, Bloomington District, Indiana Conference
- 1838 Covington, Crawfordsville District, Indiana Conference
- 1839 Covington, Crawfordsville District, Indiana Conference

At the Indiana Conference of 1840, James L. Thompson was one of several ministers who, through representatives, asked for and received the status of superannuated preachers. These shiftings year by year were by the Methodist custom of the time.

In 1841 he is listed as "superannuated", the old-fashioned term for the retired preacher, yet in that year he would have been only about fifty years old. *The Davenport Gazette* for July 25, 1850, seemed to think there was nothing

¹¹ Information received in letters from Mrs. Vera S. Cooper, Librarian, DePauw University; Sweet's *Circuit-Rider Days in Indiana*, pp. 109, 121, 137, 152, 167, 182, 201, 219, 227.

decrepit about him. The editor dipped his pen into campaign ink to say, "We were pleased to meet the Whig candidate for the gubernatorial chair in this place last Saturday. Instead of the superannuated, decrepit, old man as our loco-foco contemporaries so industriously circulate, we found him a stout old gentleman of 59, neither using a cane, nor wearing glasses, courteous, sociable, his mental faculties unimpaired, his physical energies vigorous."

It is further shown that in Indiana he was vitally interested in education. At the 1833 session of the Indiana Conference, a committee of five was appointed "to make inquiries relative to the establishment of a Conference Seminary". James L. Thompson was one of this committee of five members. The school which eventually was established was Indiana's Asbury College, now DePauw University.¹²

Although Thompson settled in Iowa City, or on a farm near there, in 1840, and lived in Iowa City at least until the close of 1850, he never became a member of the Iowa Annual Conference which was organized in 1844. The Iowa City church had been gotten together in 1840, and was included in the Rock River Conference until the Iowa churches were set off by themselves. Dr. Gallaher's article indicates that Thompson was helpful. At the first session of the Rock River Conference created in 1840 Bartholomew Weed was named presiding elder of the Dubuque District and G. G. Worthington was assigned to the Iowa Mission. "Partly because of illness and partly because of the extent of his parish, it appears that Reverend Worthington was not able to give much attention to the Iowa City Methodist group and Reverend Thompson assisted in the work. . . . The officers representing the Iowa City Mission had adopted a resolution authorizing the presiding elder to appoint an agent to solicit funds in the East. It was, apparently, soon

¹² Sweet's *Circuit-Rider Days in Indiana*, p. 120.

after the decision of the trustees to build a brick church that Reverend Bowman was delegated to perform this duty, leaving his work at Iowa City in the hands of Reverend Thompson. Bowman was gone about six months". This was in 1842. In 1845 "Reverend Laban Case was assigned to the Iowa City Circuit, but arrangements were made by which he had charge of the congregations in the area around Iowa City while the elderly Reverend Thompson looked after Iowa City proper."¹³

That his interest in education continued is shown by what has already been said about his association with the projected Iowa City College. His interest in political matters in the new State is attested by his nomination as one of three Whig candidates in Johnson County for delegates to the Territorial Constitutional Convention of 1844.¹⁴ Whig candidates were not popular, and Thompson and his colleagues were not elected. As already shown, he campaigned with his young friend Harlan in 1847.

Some details of the life of this frontier preacher and politician may be gleaned from the records of the United States Census of 1850. At that time James L. Thompson was listed as the owner or operator of one hundred and thirty acres of land in Scott Township, Johnson County, Iowa. Of this land, estimated to be worth some \$1200, one hundred and twenty acres were "improved". But here again there are some confusing records. Although the agriculture statistics list James L. Thompson in Scott Township, the population records list him in Iowa City. His age was given as fifty-nine and his birthplace as Kentucky. His real estate was valued at \$1800. The family included his wife, Rachel J.

¹³ THE IOWA JOURNAL OF HISTORY AND POLITICS, Vol. XXXVII, pp. 386, 387, 393, 396, 397.

¹⁴ Louis Pelzer's "The History and Principles of the Whigs of the Territory of Iowa", in THE IOWA JOURNAL OF HISTORY AND POLITICS, Vol. V, p. 74.

Thompson, aged forty-nine, also born in Kentucky, four sons — Hamilton A., twenty-three, James R., twenty, Bannister W., seventeen, and Marion G., thirteen. One daughter, Martha A., was fifteen. All the children were born in "Ia", meaning Indiana. Some of the names listed in the same district (District No. 9, Iowa City) became well known in Iowa history — Morgan Reno, Robert Finkbine, Joseph T. Fales, Thos. H. Benton, Jr., Wm. P. Hepburn, George H. Yewell, and Curtis Bates.¹⁵

Thus, with farming and with politics and with the experiment with a college and with preaching here and there, he was a busy pioneer. Several notations refer to him as old or venerable; he had been considered ripe for superannuated status; but he evidently still had considerable energy.¹⁶

The State campaign of 1850 does not seem to have stirred much enthusiasm among the Whigs. *The Davenport Gazette* for May 23rd carried a brief story of the convention with the names of the nominees.¹⁷ The issue of May 30th printed Harlan's letter declining the nomination with a brief comment. *The Gazette* continued to print the names of the candidates for the several offices with that of Governor blank until the issue of July 4th, when Thompson's name is included, but with no explanation of the method of his designation, and with no comment concerning him. *The Gazette* for July 18th, however, quotes from the *Iowa City Repub-*

¹⁵ Original Record Volumes of the United States Census for 1850, "Agriculture" and "Population". The data from the "Population" records was furnished by the State Department of History and Archives, Des Moines, Iowa.

¹⁶ As a superannuated minister of the Indiana Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church Thompson received an annual stipend of \$200.— Information furnished by Mrs. Vera S. Cooper, Librarian, DePauw University.

¹⁷ The Whig candidates as first listed were: Governor, James Harlan; Secretary of State, Isaac Cody of Linn County; Auditor, W. H. Seavers of Mahaska County; and Treasurer, Evan Jay of Henry County.— *The Davenport Gazette*, May 23, 1850.

lican an article written in the rococo literary style of the times, in answer to a "locofoco diatribe" in *The Reporter*. The editor recites Thompson's birth in Kentucky, his early migration to Indiana to escape the "peculiar institution of the South". There he assumed the "arduous duties of a minister of the gospel". The editorial goes on: "But, at length, his family becoming large, numerous, and in fact cumbersome to him, as a minister according to the itinerant plan pursued by the church of which he was a member he deemed it expedient and proper to seek a discharge from his laborious and irksome position. He consequently sought and obtained a reluctant consent of his brethren to withdraw from the active duties of the ministry.

"He then emigrated to the State of Iowa, and became one among her first settlers. He came not in wealth and affluence, but with barely enough means to secure a title to 80 acres of wild, unimproved land. This he obtained, occupied, and improved. Here in his comfortable *log cabin* by industry, frugality and perseverance he has surrounded himself and family with a portion of the common necessities and some of the conveniences of life. . . .

"No man in Indiana, we are confidently assured, was ever more beloved than James L. Thompson, by all who knew him and no other man was more extensively known to the inhabitants of that state who could say as his friends say for him, that he was without a single enemy".

Two other articles in *The Gazette* have already been cited. The political elan of the editor was, however, more engaged with the congressional race in the second district between Col. W. H. Henderson of Iowa City, Whig, and Lincoln Clark of Dubuque, Democrat.

The election on August 5, 1850, resulted in Hempstead's election by a vote of 13,486 to 11,403 for Thompson, or by a plurality of 2,083. The Democrats elected the rest of their

candidates by average pluralities of 1600.¹⁸ They had the right to be politely jubilant over the result. There was an omen in the returns, however, that gave them little concern; but it betokened a political storm that was to wipe the Democratic majority out of sight and the party into a minority position for nearly forty years. Following the example of Martin Van Buren and his friends in the national election of 1848, a Free Soil Party appeared in this Iowa election of 1850, with the active and vocal abolitionist, William Penn Clarke¹⁹ of Iowa City, as the candidate for Governor.²⁰ He received 575 votes. It was not much of a vote, but four years later the anti-slavery sentiment had multiplied the Whig vote with a majority for James W. Grimes for Governor; and the Democrats did not come back to the gubernatorial chair until 1889, when Horace Boies of Waterloo shocked the Republicans of Iowa.

The election over and Hempstead installed as Governor, the Reverend Mr. Thompson retired into obscurity. We read nothing more about him in the news of the time. The same year he disappeared from the annals of the Indiana Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church,²¹ disap-

¹⁸ Lincoln Clark defeated William H. Henderson for Congress in the Second District. In the State Senate the Democrats elected thirteen members to four Whigs; and in the House the tally was thirty-five Democrats and four Whigs.—Louis Pelzer's "The History and Principles of the Democratic Party of Iowa 1846-1857" in *THE IOWA JOURNAL OF HISTORY AND POLITICS*, Vol. VI, p. 192.

¹⁹ William Penn Clarke was an eminent lawyer in Iowa City, where he settled in 1844. He was an early abolitionist, with a facile pen and vigorous oratory. After the Civil War he located in Washington, D. C., where he died in 1903.—Stiles's *Recollections and Sketches of Notable Lawyers and Public Men of Early Iowa*, p. 767.

²⁰ The Free Soilers, meeting in Iowa City on May 8, 1850, nominated, in addition to William Penn Clarke: Secretary of State, Frederick Hyser of Des Moines County; Auditor, W. W. Isbell of Linn County; Treasurer, Clark Alexander of Washington County; Treasurer of the Board of Public Works, William Miller of Van Buren County.—*The Davenport Gazette*, May 16, 1850.

²¹ Information from Mrs. Vera S. Cooper, Librarian, DePauw University.

peared completely and is mentioned no more. There is no more record of that stipend paid to him as a retired preacher. He just disappears from the record. Nor is there any record discoverable of his death in or near Iowa City, nor of burial in the Iowa City cemetery or in the cemetery of the Brick Chapel, just off the Rochester Road and near the farm he was said to occupy.

In an article in the *Iowa Historical Record*, entitled "Some Pioneer Preachers of Iowa", Charles W. Irish wrote of Thompson in the past tense — "But the leader of all the early circuit riders of the early times was 'Father' Thompson, as he was familiarly called by all who knew him. He made his home in the beautiful grove on the Rochester road about three miles east of Iowa City, and here he reared his very large family. Father Thompson was a large hearted, kindly man, who by his genial manners became endeared to all who knew him. He was an inveterate horse trader, so it was his habit to start on his circuit with three or four extra horses, and many a time he would return with two or three head more than he took away; but success was not always on his side of the bargain. The writer once heard him relate that on one of these trips he met with a lot of Hoosiers who succeeded so well in deceiving him in the *swap* which took place, that he found himself minus four good horses, and instead, the unlucky possessor of two very vicious, but fine looking ones; one of these would kick and bite so savagely as to be decidedly dangerous, the other would balk so bad that 'it would not pull an old hen off her nest,' and if a harness was put upon it, that horse would not move ahead a rod a day; would refuse to go until the harness was taken off its back; under the saddle it was the same, so he 'swapped' them off for a rifle and four calico handkerchiefs."²²

²² *Iowa Historical Record*, Vol. X (1894), p. 124.

And the strange part of it all is that after these several references to his farm on the Rochester Road, the eighty acres with the beautiful grove, which he improved with so much labor along with all of his public efforts — the strange thing is that in the records in the Johnson County courthouse there is no reference whatever to his ownership of any farm. He appears nowhere as the grantee or the grantor of any parcel of land. Nor is there any record of a will in his name. What became of that farm and of the large family is beyond our present knowledge. Brother Thompson passed completely from the scene of his busy pioneer life and has been entirely forgotten. He contributed out of an ardent soul to the story of Iowa and Iowa City; and then passed silently into the dim realm of forgotten men.

CHARLES E. SNYDER

DAVENPORT IOWA