

Welsh Settlements in Iowa

from

Hanes Cymry America

(A History of the Welsh in America)

by Rev. Robert D. Thomas

edited with introduction by

JAMES W. WHITAKER

translated by

PHILLIPS G. DAVIES

The Reverend Robert David Thomas, author of Hanes Cymry America (A History of the Welsh in America), was a much-traveled Welsh minister, born in Llanrwst, Denbighshire, North Wales in 1817, who served several Welsh Congregational churches in his native land and in the United States. He was a noted writer of prose and poetry under the "bardic" name Iorthyryn Gwynedd, winning several prizes for his work at Welsh eisteddfords or cultural assemblies. One of Thomas's interests was fostering Welsh immigration to the United States--a step he, his wife, and his two children took in 1855, three years after his first visit to this country.

A History of the Welsh in America (published in 1872) was intended by Thomas as a guide to prospective immigrants. He set forth in his book the conditions to be found in various sections of the country and gave detailed descriptions of existing Welsh settlements. Thomas was only one of many nineteenth-century immigrants and visitors who wrote of their experiences in the New World. Often, as in his case, their works were in the language of the Old Country, written in order to aid fellow countrymen. Thomas and others identified immigrant communities in the United States, explained land laws, geography, and transportation routes, and gave general advice about prospects.

As a group, the Welsh were not particularly different from other immigrants coming to the United States. The first immigrants from North Wales were mostly farmers who settled in New York and Pennsylvania in the 1790s. They sought better economic opportunities and escape from political "oppression" in Britain following the French Revolution. Only incidentally were early Welsh immigrants concerned to perpetuate their language and their culture.

*By the 1840s, however, worsening economic conditions and a growing sense of their own, un-English heritage led more Welsh to immigrate. Crop failures in 1840 and again in 1841 forced many would-be farmers off the land and into the coal mines of South Wales. The lesser evil of immigration seemed a solution both for farmers facing starvation and for disgruntled, hard-worked miners. They willingly believed the encouraging accounts of the new land to the West found in pro-immigration writings such as Reverend Benjamin Childlow's *Yr American*....*

Although statistics are not complete, by 1850 there were at least 29,000 Welsh-born residents in the United States, and by 1870, the number had grown to over 74,000. By 1890, Welsh settlements had been established in Pennsylvania, Ohio, New York, Illinois, Wisconsin, Iowa, Utah, Colorado, and Minnesota. In all of these settlements, the Welsh tried to preserve their cultural institutions--their language, their religion, and their social habits.



The Welsh church located above Old Man's Creek in Johnson County (Robert Ryan photo.)

The information and the advice Thomas gave in his book, as in other books of its kind, was not always disinterested or accurate. Railroads, land companies, and even state governments subsidized immigrant guides touting the supposed salubrious climate and bountiful land of a particular region. The enthusiastic and glowing descriptions, at best exaggerations and often plainly mistaken as to the abundance and immediate economic value of America's resources, are not the main historical interest of these works, however. The guidebooks and reports on emigration are useful for identifying the location of the immigrants, for tracing the ancestry or studying the influence of groups such as the Welsh, and for specific, detailed information about individual settlers and social institutions.

The following is excerpted from a translation of Chapter Five of Thomas's *Hanes Cymry America*. Thomas did for all parts of the country with Welsh settlers what he did below for Iowa. Internal evidence indicates that he condensed much of the general information in his first five paragraphs from another guide, *Iowa: The Home for Immigrants*, published in 1870 by the State of Iowa, and he cites that book at the end of his introductory remarks. *Hanes Cymry America* was published in Utica, New York in 1872 and was based in part on travels Thomas made to

Welsh settlements in the Midwest. His hope of publishing a second volume to be devoted primarily to biographical accounts of famous Welsh-Americans was never fulfilled.

To get an idea of how accounts like these were slanted to entice future settlers, one should notice that the Black Hawk War and various Indian treaties which cleared Iowa for "legal" white settlement are missing from the first paragraph's brief historical summary, that Iowa does not mean "the beautiful land," that Thomas gives the date Congress first authorized Iowa for statehood when, in fact, Iowans at first rejected the proposed constitution and statehood, and that the description of lands to the northwest as "worse" is a very subjective judgment based on the prejudice that prairie-land (which needed to be drained and tilled) was less valuable than timber. (The truth is that Iowa has about one-fourth of all the grade one farmland in the United States.) Also, many of the statistics Thomas gives in his introductory remarks are wrong.

The following excerpts retain the errors and misspellings of the original 1872 edition, with correct information noted in brackets where appropriate. The sections on specific Welsh settlements in Johnson, Mahaska, and Howard counties were selected as typical of Thomas's approach, although several lists of names have

been deleted. Family or local historians may wish to consult the full text of Chapter Five of *Hanes Cymry America* (translated by Prof. Davies), which is now on file at the Division of the State Historical Society in Iowa City.

J. W.

This is an excellent state in regard to its land, its mines, its rivers, its climate, its trees, its railroads, its wealth, its schools, its customs, and its religion. It is said that the meaning of the name Iowa is "y tir prydferth" (*the beautiful land*) and that it was given to it by the Indians when they saw it for the first time as they were traveling to the west. The land was first populated by tribes of Iowa and Sioux Indians. It belonged to France and later to Spain. A Frenchman by the name of Julian Dubuque bought the first land there from the Indians on September 22, 1788 in the area where Dubuque now stands. In 1803 the area was transferred by France to the United States. In 1832 [1834] the Government placed soldiers in "Fort Des Moines." After that many people from the New England states emigrated to it and began to settle in areas where Burlington and Keokuk now stand. It remained a territory for many years and became a state of the Union March 3, 1845 [actually Dec. 28, 1846]. Its population was only 22,859 in 1838 but it grew quickly. By 1870 it contained 1,181,359 [1,194,020] people. The state contains about a hundred counties, and many of them have from 10,000 to 30,000 inhabitants and some more than that. The counties of Scott (where the City of Davenport is), Dubuque, Lee, Clinton, Linn, Des Moines, Marion, Mahaska, Clayton, Polk, Wapello, and Muscatine, etc. are the most populous; and there are many counties which have less than a

few hundred or thousand inhabitants; for instance, Lyon, Ida, O'Brien, Sioux, Audubon, Buena Vista, Calhoun, Carroll, Cherokee, Clay, Dickinson, Emmett, Hancock, Palo Alto, Plymouth, Pochahontas, Sac, Shelby, Tama, Warren, Worth, Wright. By looking at a map, one sees that the majority of the less populated counties lies in the northwest, on the boundaries of Minnesota and Nebraska. It is true that the land in these districts is worse and has less wood than the other counties of the state; but thousands of farmers, laborers, craftsmen, and miners have been able through labor and diligence to establish free and happy homes in them as well as in many of the other counties in the central and southern parts of the state.

The State of Iowa is 300 miles in width from the east to the west, or from the banks of the Mississippi near the City of Davenport to Council Bluffs on the banks of the Missouri; it is over 200 miles long from its boundary with southern Minnesota to the northern boundary of the State of Missouri. It contains 55,045 [55,986] square miles and 33,238,800 [35,831,040] acres of land. It is nearly as large as England, and more than twice the size of Scotland. There are no places which contain very high mountains; but it has much hilly land, rather like the waves of the sea, which are formed into the extensive prairies, and many rocky and steep hills. There is sufficient wood along the banks of its rivers. It contains very little boggy land; but it rises gradually from the banks of the Mississippi and the Missouri toward the center of the state and in places there its elevation is over 900 feet above the Mississippi River; and thus there is a considerable descent to the inland rivers; for instance, the Des Moines, Skunk,

Iowa, Wapsipinicon, Maquoketa, and the Red Cedar, which run from the northwest and flow into the Mississippi in various places; and there are several places where river estuaries flow into the chief internal rivers. The Des Moines River rises in Minnesota and runs through the State of Iowa for over 300 miles.

The following rivers run through the state from the north-east to the southwest; Big Sioux, Floyd, Little Sioux, Boyer, Nishnabotna, and flow into the Missouri. The southern part of the state is watered by the following rivers which rise there and run into the State of Missouri; for instance, the Chariton, Grand, Platte, Nodaways. There are many extensive lakes in the northern part of the state--some of them over ten miles long and two miles wide. Nine tenths of the State of Iowa is prairie land; there usually is wood along the banks of the rivers, and at times groves of wood on the prairies themselves. There are many more trees in the eastern part than in the west. There is every variety of tree: "white, black and burr oak, black walnut, butternut, hickory, hard and soft maple, cherry, red and white elm, ash, linn, hackberry, birch, honey locust, cottonwood, sycamore, red cedar, pine." [Quotation in English] It is possible to raise them and their seedlings on the prairies, and cottonwood, maple, and walnut grow quickly.

The state is rich in valuable mines. There is good coal, with veins from three to six feet thick in 30 counties; most of them are along the Des Moines and other rivers. It is bituminous coal; it is not deep, and it is possible to work it without great expense. Six million bushels of it were produced in the year 1868. In the northern counties there is an abundance of

peat, and one can get enough fuel in places where there is neither lumber or coal. There are many lead and iron mines near Dubuque and other places near the banks of the Mississippi [Iowa had no iron mines]. There is limestone in the majority of the counties and enough building stone in most of them. The land, even on the highest prairies, is good and productive, and is very rich in the valleys and suitable for raising every sort of grain. It is possible to get pure water anywhere by digging wells from 30 to 40 feet deep. It is also a good land for hay, for pasture, and fruit trees. In places there are orchards and excellent gardens. It is known for its educational facilities. It has a university, colleges and over six thousand schoolhouses, with nearly twenty thousand teachers [nearer twelve thousand]; it also has good facilities for the insane, the sick, the blind, the deaf and dumb, and orphans.

Its railroads are now numerous and convenient, and many of them are connected with the chief railroads which run across the State of Illinois to Chicago; four or five of them extend from the banks of the Mississippi across Iowa all the way to the banks of the Missouri and connect with the Pacific Railway in Omaha. Others run from the south to the north and soon they will connect with the chief railroads in Minnesota and in Missouri, Kansas and Nebraska (see the section of this book on railroads). It is possible to get excellent land from the railroad companies for \$5 to \$15 an acre, and at times one can have a long time to pay for it. They have hundreds of thousands of acres of good land for sale also, but it is being bought up quickly. One cannot get cheap land from the Government now except in the northwest; there is still al-

most a quarter million (250,000) acres of [federal land] there. The majority of it is in Osceola, Lyon, Sioux, and Plymouth counties, and soon the St. Paul & Sioux R.R. will be constructed through them. *Speculators* are not able to buy this land; it is sold only to those who settle on it. [Thomas was wrong about speculators; they could and did acquire land for resale through various stratagems and frauds.] Now is the time for Welsh emigrants to settle on cheap railroad land in the central part and especially in the south-western part of the state. (See "Iowa; the Home for Immigrants; being a Treatise on the Resources of Iowa." Published by order of the Board of Immigration. A. R. Fulton, Esq., Secretary, Des Moines, Iowa. [1870])

I will now give a little information about the Welsh settlements in the State of Iowa.

OLD MAN'S CREEK, JOHNSON CO., IOWA

This settlement is located in an agricultural district about four or five miles south-west of Iowa City, where the main markets and the post office are found. Iowa City is a beautiful growing town on the banks of the Iowa River near forests and in the center of fruitful agricultural land. Twenty years ago it was but a small place. It had been the seat of government for years until it was moved to the city of Desmoines [sic]; but the state *University* is still there along with many buildings and large stores. There are some Welsh merchants there, for instance Mr. Charles Lewis and his brother George Lewis, formerly of Remsen, N.Y.; Mr. D. Griffiths, formerly of New York City, and others. The Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific R.R. runs through this city, and it was in places near this

railroad where the Welsh settled at Old Man's Creek.

The Welsh began to populate the place around the year 1840. The first settlers were Edward Williams and Oliver Thomas, formerly of Montgomeryshire. A year or two after that came Joseph Hughes, of Glyn Ceiriog, Denbighshire, Thos. Jones from South Wales, and Henry Clement. After that came Peter Hughes, the son of Joseph Hughes, and William Evans. His dear brother, Mr. Richard Tudor and his family, formerly of Penegoes, Montgomeryshire came there about the year 1843. After that, David H. Jones of Llanbryn-mair, David Davies, and others arrived. They all came there from Ebensburgh, Pa., through Pittsburgh, along the Ohio River to Cairo, down the Mississippi to St. Louis, and some of them landed in Keokuk, others in Bloomington (now Muscatine). They traveled with their animals overland to the new settlements; they built houses of *logs* amid the wooded groves and close to each other within a mile of the stream called Old Man's Creek and on its northern bank. Near this river there were thousands of acres of excellent Government land for \$1.25 an acre, enough wood and an abundance of *rolling prairies* to be purchased. They made a wise choice; it is land noted for its fruitfulness and healthfulness. But they worked there for many years with many civil and religious disadvantages. When they came there first there were a few families of other nationalities living in the district, English and Scots, for instance James Seahorn, Ellison Davies and his brothers and sisters, and others; and there were only three stores in Iowa City and few houses. Nor was there a bridge to cross the Iowa River, nothing

but a *ferry boat*. They sold their goods there for the following low prices: Corn, for 10 cents a bushel; wheat, for 18 to 23 cents a bushel; pork, for \$1.50 a hundred-weight; butter, for from 6 to 7 cents a pound! Frequently they did not get money for them--nothing but credit. The railroads did not run at that time across either Illinois or Iowa, and they were over fifty miles from the settlements overland to Davenport and Muscatine on the banks of the Mississippi River. But after the completion of the Illinois railroad from Chicago to Rock Island, after the Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific R.R. was opened to Iowa City around the year 1855, and after it was finished later across the state to the town of Council Bluffs on the banks of the Missouri, emigrants began to settle by the thousands in Iowa and there was a revival of its agriculture, its arts, and its business. The old settlers had chosen the flat lands and the high wooded hills; the majority of them avoided the woodless prairies because they did not believe that they would be productive. But from the year 1865 to the present, hosts of Welsh emigrants, the majority of them from Ebensburgh, Pa. have bought these *rolling prairies* and have settled on them and have gotten abundant crops of grain, etc. out of them. There is but little of this land to be gotten there now, and one is not able to buy it for less than \$10 or \$15 an acre; one cannot get an excellent farmstead in the area without paying \$20 to \$50 an acre.

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THE WELSH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF OLD MAN'S CREEK

The majority of the old settlers were religious people and high principled

Congregationalists. They held prayer meetings and Sunday School in private houses for many years before a minister came there. The Congregational church was founded there on February 20, 1846 by the Rev. David Knowles, formerly of Montgomeryshire and included 15 members. He labored there for three years in connection with the Congregational church of Long Creek. In 1849 the Rev. George Lewis of Putnam, Ohio came there and he remained for nearly six years. About the year 1855 came the Rev. Morris M. Jones from Radnor, Ohio and ministered there for some years; he still lives on his prosperous farm with his respected family. After him came the Rev. Evan Griffiths, formerly of Llanellyn, Merioneth, and served successfully for five years. After that came the Rev. Cadr. D. Jones who was a popular minister for four years and cared for the church until the beginning of the year 1870. The first church was built in 1855 on a prominent hill, near a forest, and within a mile of the river on the north side near the farm of Hugh Tudor, Esq.

From the year 1859 until 1869 there was much growth in the settlement and also in the church; and in the year 1870 a new and beautiful place of worship was built, much larger than the first, in the same place, and they paid off their debt. It was an adornment to the settlement and an honor to the denomination and the congregation. It now has 140 members, a large Sunday School, and a strong congregation. I believe that Oliver Thomas, Edward Tudor, and David H. Jones, among others, are the deacons. It contains many rich, wise, and faithful men and many industrious and talented young people. They need an able minister who can speak and write eloquently

and preach fluently in both Welsh and English. I hope they get a minister of this sort quickly and that they hold him in respect. They are easily able to pay him \$1,000 a year. Several of the members belong to the Calvinist Methodists, the Baptists, and the Wesleyans, but they worship together with the Congregationalists. None of the other denominations have formed a church there yet; perhaps the Calvinist Methodists will do so quickly. The dear and faithful brother, the Rev. Evan Roberts, a Wesleyan, lives in the district, and is a faithful member and an approved preacher in that church. I believe that Edward Tudor, Esq., is the Secretary of the church. Address letters to him as follows: Ed. Tudor, Esq., Farmer, Old Man's Creek, Iowa City P.O., Johnson Co., Iowa.

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OSKALOOSA JUNCTION, BEACON P.O., MAHASKA CO., IOWA

The old name for this place was Enterprise. It stands in the Des Moines Valley, about 2½ miles from the city of Oskaloosa. Two railroads run past it, the Iowa Central R.R. and the Des Moines Valley R.R. It is possible to get there by rail from Ottumwa (25 miles), or from Des Moines City (61 miles). There are not many roads across the country to Williamsburgh, Iowa Co. [the site of a large Welsh settlement]. Agricultural land and excellent veins of coal surround the place for miles, and one is able to buy the land for reasonable prices. It is quite wooded country.

John S. Morgan and Watkin Williams of Cardiganshire came here from the Welsh settlement in Monroe Co. to work in the coal fields in 1856. Americans had

opened the mines whose veins were 5 to 7 feet thick. But the above men did not move their families here until the end of 1865. Both before and after that many miners came to work and to settle. They were paid from \$2 to \$2.50 a day. John G. Jones, Esq. has kept a large store here since 1857. It also contains the post office. Several respected and wealthy Welshmen live on farms and as overseers in the coal mines. Some of them own a large part of them: for instance, Watkin Price, Esq., and his brothers Joshua Price, John Price, Jenkin Price; and Watkin Price, formerly of Hirwain, Glynedd and Aberdar, Glamorgan. The Rev. Peter Lloyd (B.) died here in September 1868 and was buried in Forest Cemetery at the age of 67. His widow, Mrs. Lloyd, and their children live on their nearby farm at the present time. David S. Davies of Pont-y-pridd was the *boss* of one of the coal mines in 1870....About 43 families and 215 Welsh people....

LIME SPRING, HOWARD CO., IOWA

This is a new and growing Welsh settlement. Howard County bounds on the southern edge of Minnesota and the Welsh in this settlement are scattered along the boundaries of the two states; that is, Iowa and Minnesota. Some Dutch and Norwegians have lived along the Upper Iowa River in Howard County in Iowa and in Fillmore County in Minnesota for some years, but they live in poor houses and they have not cultivated the land very well. Some of them are very fond of drinking liquor, but many of them are good, religious Lutherans. The Welsh began to settle there in 1859. R. Jones and T. Evans and their families were the first Welsh to come. A youth by the name of R. Thomas, J. Williams, and

J. Jones and their families came to live there in 1860. D. Davies and W. Davies and their families came the following year. All of these had previously been in various parts of Wisconsin. The Rev. John D. Williams (T.C.) of Proscairon, Wis., moved to the district in June 1862 and preached in the house of John Jones. This was the first preaching in Welsh ever heard in this district, for we don't know of any other elsewhere. Mr. Williams bought land there at this time, but in October 1867 he sold his farm and he and his family moved to Wisconsin to live. He had built a good wooden house near a wood which stands on the border of the two states. During the same period the Rev. Daniel T. Rowlands (T.C.) bought a farm and he and his family moved the following spring from the state of New York. He had been born in Bethesda, Caernarvonshire. In the year 1868 the Rev. Owen R. Morris and his family moved from Blue Mounds, Wis. to the district. He was from Ffestiniog, Merioneth. The Rev. John J. Evans and his family of Welsh Prairie, Wis. arrived in 1869. He is a native of Llanddeiniolen, Caernarvonshire. The four respected ministers lived on their farms and cooperated in extending the good news of Christ in the area. The Welsh population there now is about 500.

THE CALVINIST METHODIST CHURCHES

Three churches have been formed; Sunday Schools are held and there is preaching in several convenient schoolhouses in the various districts. 1. Foreston. Members 99, Deacons--H. Edwards, O. Williams, W. T. Lewis, and H. G. Jones. 2. Proscairon. Members 22, Deacons--D. Davies and R. Hughes. 3. Yorktown. Members 44, Deacons--W. Williams and

O. Humphreys. When I was there at the end of 1870, no one had begun to build a church, but they were worshipping in various schoolhouses. I believe that this is wise because it is difficult to know at this time where it would be most proper to build churches for the future population.

Forestown [sic] was the first name to be given to this Welsh settlement. It is a small village on the west side of the Upper Iowa River. A flour mill was built on the other side of the river, and three respected Welshmen own it: the Rev. John D. Williams, John ab Jones, Esq. from Cambria, Wisconsin, and Mr. David Thomas, formerly of Cwmydail, near Llanfair-caereinion, Montgomeryshire. In about the year 1867 the railroad from McGregory [sic] to St. Paul was opened; after that the new city of Lime Spring was started. Some Welsh merchants and craftsmen live in it and the Welsh of the whole district trade there. The railroad station is near the Welsh settlements, but there is still no Welsh church or chapel. This small and new town is located on the railroad about a mile west of the old town of Lime Spring and about three miles west of the old village of Forestown. Many of the houses were moved from the old village to the new town.

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Following is the report of the Rev. John D. Williams...about the lands in the Lime Spring settlement: "The land is good and level all round until one comes near the rivers. There is much scarcity of wood, and one is able to get free coal if he needs it; the water is very good; it is rather scarce in some places but there is

an abundance of it elsewhere. It is likely that the land is as good as any in the world, and one is able to buy it cheaply, that is, for from \$10 to \$35 an acre according to the value of the labor that has been put into it."

There is enough *water power* in the Upper Iowa River; there is valuable wood along its banks and in other places, and much very fruitful *rolling prairie* around there for miles. One hears of the possibility of another railroad from Davenport, Iowa, past Greuger, etc. to

St. Paul, Minnesota. That will be also an advantage to the Welsh settlers here. It is likely that scores if not hundreds of Welsh families will come to live there in the future. They will be able to make good homes for themselves and their children in Howard and in the other nearby counties. The winter is fairly long and cold compared to the conditions in the southern part of Iowa.

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COMMENTARY

Sharp-eyed readers will notice a change on the title page of *The Palimpsest*. After five years of editing this magazine, I have resigned to take on a different set of professional responsibilities, and a new name appears as editor with this issue. Charles Phillips is a writer and man of letters with degrees from The University of Iowa and Syracuse University in New York. He is experienced; he previously worked on the magazine of LeMoyne College in New York, on the staff of *Congressional Quarterly* in Washington, D.C., and was editor of *The Maelstrom*, a literary magazine published by Syracuse University. For the last year and a half he has been the editorial assistant at the State Historical Society and as such worked with many authors and on many lay-outs for the *Pal*. Deciding to leave Iowa and *The Palimpsest* was hard, but turning the magazine over to Charlie is an occasion for joy--he will give you a superb publication.

Before writing my final words as editor, I must thank the many people who have made the last five years such an important part of my life. The authors, from many walks of life and with many talents, have been a fascinating group. The readers--insofar as I have received your comments--have been stimulating and appreciative. My colleagues at the Historical Society have been ever helpful, and to many of them, especially Tim Hyde, Claudia Majetich, and Rob Bower, I have become deeply indebted. Most of all, my thanks to Peter Harstad who directed the Society and its publications through good times and bad with nearly unfailing grace and intelligence. My debt and Iowa's debt to all of these people is large.

And so, goodbye.

L. Edward Purcell