

THE PALIMPSEST

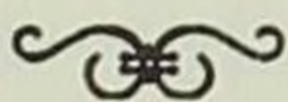
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Conquerors of the Frontier

The story of Iowa is replete with romance. For 130 years, beginning with the discovery of the Upper Mississippi by Joliet and Marquette in 1673, Iowa was under the jurisdiction of either France or Spain. In 1803 Jefferson bought all Louisiana west of the Mississippi from Napoleon, and Iowa became a part of the United States. It is significant that there was no increase in land value throughout these 130 years of foreign jurisdiction ending in 1803, and no one charged Jefferson with robbing Napoleon when he paid a scant five cents an acre for the Louisiana Purchase. There were plenty of political foes, on the other hand, who angrily charged Jefferson with wasting money on a lot of worthless land.

During the next thirty years Iowa formed a part of various territories. The land itself remained in the possession of the Indians with no permanent white settlers occupying it. A few exceptions might be cited: Julien Dubuque continued mining at present-day Dubuque until his death in 1810;

and a handful of settlers squatted in the Half-breed Tract in what is now Lee County in the years immediately preceding 1833. Throughout this thirty-year period, however, there was no appreciation in land value, although the government did pay the Indians approximately two and one-half times as much as Jefferson had paid Napoleon. As late as 1845, when Asa Whitney offered to pay 25 cents an acre for a railroad right-of-way across northern Iowa, a Congressional Committee declared that the unsettled land was not worth more than ten cents an acre.

A new era opened following the acquisition of the Black Hawk Purchase in 1832. Permanent white settlement began on June 1, 1833. In the years that followed a steadily swelling tide of emigration flowed into the Black Hawk Purchase. In a single generation American frontiersmen conquered the wilderness that constitutes the eastern half of Iowa. They did this with the axe, the plow, and the flail — aided by their horses or slow-moving oxen. They hunted with their rifles and fished in the crystal clear streams that emptied into the Mississippi. Deer, elk, buffalo, and bear fell to their unerring aim and added to the family larder. Small game was readily trapped in the forests and on the prairies.

While they were breaking the tough prairie sod and wresting a living from the rich black soil that lay beneath, these pioneers did many other things

that helped to make Iowa the great state it is today. They established schools, academies, and even a great State University of Iowa. They brought religion to the frontier and founded fine Christian colleges. They transplanted the political and social customs of their native states to the Iowa frontier. By 1838 these sturdy frontiersmen had won for themselves a separate territorial existence; by 1846 they had achieved statehood; during the Civil War they contributed almost eighty thousand volunteers to the Union Army.

In the final analysis it was the plain and sturdy pioneers who were responsible for transforming a sprawling prairie wilderness into one of the richest commonwealths of the Union. In many respects these men must be considered the real builders of the Hawkeye State. But it also took leaders with visions, high ideals, boundless energy, and unflagging determination to encourage and direct the progress of these grass-roots Iowans through the four or five generations that constitute the first century of Iowa history. In politics and constitution making, in education and religion, in agriculture and industry, these leaders have played a decisive role. The story of a few of them is well worth recording.

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