

# THE PALIMPSEST

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## The El Dorado of Iowa

On April 20, 1836, the Territory of Wisconsin was born. This wilderness empire stretched across forests and prairies from Lake Michigan to the Missouri River. A traveler who sojourned six months of 1837 along the upper Mississippi was delighted with the fertile soil and the healthful, invigorating climate, particularly of the Iowa District west of the river. Throughout this area the forests and prairies were well stocked with game — deer, bear, turkey, and large quantities of prairie hens and pheasants. The streams were “finely stored” with various kinds of fish; “clouds of pigeons” and “flocks of ducks” met the traveler on every hand, while “loquacious geese” could be heard in countless numbers.

Although farmers in the Iowa District were “on the trail” of a “golden fortune,” it was the mineral region that struck the fancy of this itinerant. “Of this new territory,” he wrote to the editor of the *Wheeling Gazette* in 1837, “DUBUQUE is the prospective capital; and no town of the upper Mis-

Mississippi, more richly merits that distinction. Being surrounded by a country rich in mineral, whose mines have not the half been proved, and are already the source of a great revenue, and an unrivalled farming and grazing region, possessing an industrious and enterprising population, it cannot fail to increase in importance and magnitude. . . . Go to that land, for we are confident there you will find the *El Dorado* of your imagination. Are you poor? Seek, and you shall obtain a competence. Art thou rich? There shall your monies reap a noble interest."

For a century and a half the lead mines of the upper Mississippi Valley had been the *El Dorado* of ambitious nations. To this wilderness country came Nicholas Perrot in 1690 to teach the dusky Miami Indians how to mine lead. Toward these same mines the avaricious Antoine Crozat cast a hungry look. On the prospects of such fabulous mines John Law established his "Company of the West" in 1717, only to shake the foundations of France when his "Mississippi Bubble" burst. Against these same mines the British sent a military force in 1780 to drive out the Spanish and prevent lead ore from reaching Washington's armies. From these same mines Julien Dubuque began to extract lead in 1788, the same year that the first settlements in Ohio were made at Marietta and Cincinnati. Along the western bank of the Mississippi the swarthy Dubuque staked out his

"Mines of Spain" in 1796 — the largest Spanish land grant in Iowaland.

The lead mines around present-day Dubuque continued to play a dramatic role after the Louisiana Purchase. Lieutenant Zebulon M. Pike visited Julien Dubuque while on his voyage of exploration to the upper Mississippi in 1805. Five years later, in 1810, Julien Dubuque died and was buried on a towering bluff at the mouth of Catfish Creek. In the years that followed, the warlike Fox Indians drove away the heirs of Chouteau and all other white men who sought to work Dubuque's mines. Past the tattered Fox village at the mouth of Catfish Creek the *Virginia* churned in 1823 on the first steamboat voyage on the upper Mississippi. On the present site of Dubuque in 1830 a group of lead miners drew up the Miners' Compact, the first expression of squatter sovereignty adopted in Iowa. From these same lead mines Colonel Zachary Taylor drove the trespassing "Sooners" during the bitter-cold winter of 1832-1833. There, on June 1, 1833, the full flood of immigration struck the "Iowa District" as sturdy miners crossed the Mississippi to stake out their claims in the Black Hawk Purchase.

Many future Dubuque notables swarmed across the Mississippi River in 1833. The Langworthy brothers — James L., Lucius H., and Edward — were among the first, soon to be followed by their brother, Solon. Alexander Levi came directly

from France in 1833 to engage in mining and merchandising. Warner Lewis, who served as an aide to Colonel Henry Dodge during the Black Hawk War and was destined to serve as Speaker of the House in the State legislature, cast his lot with the first pioneers. Thomas McCraney and Patrick Quigley were among the few who brought their families to the Dubuque mines. Present also was Patrick O'Connor, who was tried and hanged for murder by his fellow lead miners in 1834. The eccentric Thomas Kelley and the civic-minded Woodbury Massey (who was shot by a claim-jumper in 1835) were also trail-blazers. The names of Peter A. Lorimier, Jesse P. Farley, John King, Orrin Smith, Thomas McKnight, Francis Gehon, Augustus L. Gregoire, and Andrew Kee-secker are but a few in the long list of first squatters at Julien Dubuque's old Mines of Spain.

Furnaces were needed to smelt the lead. The primitive methods of the Indians had been very wasteful, less than fifty per cent of the lead being secured. The rich slag left behind was eagerly sought in later years. With the coming of the white man the cupola furnace was introduced whereby as much as seventy per cent of the lead was obtained. In 1834 Peter Lorimier built a cupola furnace at the mouth of Catfish Creek. Two more cupola furnaces were constructed during the following year — one in Dubuque and the other on the Little Maquoketa. Travelers who passed

the mouth of Catfish Creek by steamboat in 1835, according to A. M. Lea, could see "hardy miners" at Riprow who "tear the lead from the bowels of the earth." "The smelting establishments," Lea declared, "have recently been much improved, and are now conducted with scientific accuracy, yielding seventy or eighty per cent of lead from the native sulphuret."

Not satisfied with the efficiency of the cupola furnace, the smelters presently adopted the hearth furnace. What is said to have been the first furnace of this design constructed in America for smelting lead was built near Platteville, Wisconsin, in 1835. The second in the United States, and the first in Iowa, was located just above Rockdale on Catfish Creek. The hearth furnace was so efficient that practically all the lead was extracted, hence it soon replaced the old cupola furnace. Mr. Brunskill built a hearth furnace on Catfish Creek near Center Grove and Nathan Simpson erected one northeast of Dubuque.

The Dubuque *Visitor*, on October 19, 1836, expressed delight with the fine blast furnaces then operating in the neighborhood. Mr. Hulett's blast furnace smelted 70,000 pounds of ore weekly. The cupola furnace owned by Thomas McKnight had a similar output while Peter Lorimier's establishment at Riprow turned out 60,000 pounds. F. K. O'Ferrall's furnace was the largest, measuring seventy by thirty-three feet, and smelting 100,000

pounds per week. Several log furnaces were capable of producing weekly seventy pigs of lead weighing seventy pounds each.

The exact amount of lead produced in the Dubuque mineral region is not known. Many estimates include the production of the mines east of the Mississippi. In the years from 1823 to 1835 the Illinois-Wisconsin lead output was approximately 67,000,000 pounds. The years from 1835 to 1848, when the Dubuque lead mines were contributing their share to the total, constitute the period of greatest activity in the upper Mississippi lead mining country. During this time the annual production rose from 11,000,000 pounds to 55,000,000 pounds. The total valuation of lead received at Saint Louis from the Galena-Dubuque area in 1847 was \$1,654,077.60, or double the combined value of the Saint Louis fur trade and the commerce over the Santa Fé trail.

Some idea of the activity on the west bank of the Mississippi may be gleaned from personal accounts and newspaper columns. By September, 1834, John P. Sheldon, government register of the Dubuque district, thought he had issued "over a thousand" permits to mine lead between the "Turkey and Big Maquoketa" rivers and collected rent in lead valued at \$30,000. Sheldon found the main diggings located near the towns of Dubuque and Peru. Under the caption "Dame Fortune Again" the Dubuque *Visitor* on June 1, 1836, noted "with

pleasure" a new discovery of lead by Chauncey Swan & Company. On August 31st the same paper chronicled Mr. O'Mara's discovery of a new vein two miles northwest of Dubuque. Another deposit was found on David Sleator's lot and still others on the Wooten lot and the Herd lot.

During the years that followed Dubuque newspapers heralded with pride the discovery of new veins of lead. "The prospects of better times in the lead mines was never more flattering," declared the *Iowa News* on March 3, 1838. "Almost daily do we hear of new discoveries, being made in the country, and we believe miners were never more industrious than now, being prompted to further exertions by the success which has crowned the perseverance of others."

In 1838 it was estimated that not less than six million pounds of lead were shipped from Dubuque. The *Iowa News* declared that considerably more mineral was being raised in the spring of 1841 than at any previous time. With each passing year steamboats carried an ever increasing quantity of lead downstream to Saint Louis, fully 140,000 pigs or 9,800,000 pounds being shipped out of Dubuque in 1847 alone.

Prior to 1850 the lead mines were Dubuque's most valuable single asset. But the region did not gain as much in population during the 1840's as the more optimistic had been led to hope. This was due largely to the claims of the heirs of Au-

guste Chouteau to the land embraced in Julien Dubuque's old Spanish grant. For two decades the litigation of the Chouteaus hung like a sword of Damocles over the lead mines. Citizens of Dubuque actually questioned the right of the trustees to collect taxes when it was not possible for them to show a clear title to their real estate. Finally, in March, 1853, the United States Supreme Court sustained the property rights of the citizens in the case of Chouteau v. Molony. When the news reached Dubuque there was general rejoicing — bells rang, bonfires were kindled, and joy reigned supreme. A new era had dawned.

### SOME PIONEERS BURIED IN DUBUQUE

*Their Main Contributions Before 1860*

GEORGE WALLIS JONES — Wisconsin Territorial Delegate and one of Iowa's first U.S. Senators (1848-1859). Died July 22, 1896.

STEPHEN HEMPSTEAD — Member of Constitutional Convention of 1844 and second Governor of State of Iowa. Died February 16, 1883.

THOMAS S. WILSON — Served eight years on Territorial and one year on Iowa Supreme Court. Lawyer-judge 58 years. Died May 16, 1894.

JOHN PLUMBE, JR. — Inventor, promoter, author *Sketches of Iowa and Wisconsin* (1839); father of transcontinental railroad idea between 1836-1839. Died May 29, 1857.

JOHN FRANCIS RAGUE — Architect of Old Capitol at Iowa City and of the City Hall, County Jail, Langworthy Octagonal House, and other homes and ward schools in Dubuque. Died September 24, 1877.